

When God Shows Up

3 Letters, 3 Churches

Introduction:

Hey everyone, I'm Mark and I want to welcome you to our service! This week we are wrapping up our series, *When God Shows Up*. Here at New Hope Central Oahu we believe that when you encounter God, your life is never the same again! One moment in God's Presence will do more for you than 30 years of sitting in Church just going through the motions or trying to apply good principles to your life. It's His Presence that transforms us. So we want to be a Church where God shows up.

Throughout this series we've been looking to Jesus as our model for when God shows up because Jesus Himself said that if we know Him we will know the Father. Jesus came to unveil the Father so that He can show up in your life. We've spent weeks going over all of the amazing things that happen when God shows up — He reveals His true nature to you and all of your misconceptions about Him are removed, He fills you with His Holy Spirit and empowers you to answer His call on your life, and last week we learned that when God shows up we have access to miracles, signs and wonders. It has been a truly amazing series and I want to encourage you to re-watch it at NHCOhawaii.org because this is our highest value.

Letters from Jesus

So we've been looking at the life of Jesus, unpacking His teachings, and examining the lives of those around Him to discover what it's like when God shows up. But as we wrap up our series, we're going to do something new. We're going to read some of Jesus' letters. Did you know that Jesus wrote letters? I'm not talking about the red letters in your Bible. The way I see it, these are love letters from Jesus to His bride-to-be. We find them in the book of Revelation.

⁹ *"I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹ which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea,"* (Revelation 1:9-11).

As the chapter goes on, we discover this is Jesus. These are letters from Christ to His Church.

Book of Love Letters

When my wife Jalee and I first started our relationship, I knew immediately that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. So I didn't ask her if we could date, I asked if I could court her (Sounds Medieval, I know). Dating is sort of casual and non-committal and I had done that before. But courting is more like going on a journey with someone with the end goal being a committed relationship and eventually marriage. I didn't just want to just dip my toes in the water to see if it was nice, I was ready to dive in headfirst!

Back in the early days of our relationship, I was in a Barnes and Noble and I stumbled upon this fancy leather-bound journal. Seriously, this thing looked like it held the secrets to the universe, even though every page inside was blank. I decided to fill this journal with love letters to Jalee. This book would contain the story of our love. It was a pretty thick journal and I only filled the beginning portion of it before I mailed it off to her (We were both studying abroad). Now mind you, cellphones were already a thing! For you younger ones it's not like I was sitting by candle light writing with a quill because that was the only way we could communicate. "My dearest Jalee, 'tis been a fortnight since my last letter to you..." We could still text and call but there's just something special and intimate about handwritten letters, don't you think?

After a while, a package showed up in my mailbox. I eagerly opened it to find that same journal, now filled with pages of letters from Jalee to me. And so began our epic correspondence. We sent that journal back and forth for over a year, sharing everything from our likes and dislikes to our dreams of a future together. That journal became one of our most cherished possessions, and let me tell you, we wrote so much in it and shipped it back and forth so often that, as two broke college students, we felt the hit in our wallets. But it was worth every penny!

Then one day, I was on my way back from Canada after speaking at a conference. I made sure to pack the journal safely in my checked luggage, thinking I had the most precious cargo on earth. But, you guessed it, when I got home, my luggage was nowhere to be seen. I contacted the airport, waited, and was eventually sent a compensation form for the missing luggage. But when it came time to put a value on that journal, I was stumped. How do you put a dollar amount on something that means the world to you? To me, those letters were truly priceless.

3 Letters, 3 Churches

As we dive into the final chapters of scripture, we stumble upon some intriguing letters from Jesus to the Church. Back in the day, I used to read these letters like they were stern warnings from a cosmic government agency, and the Church was constantly on the brink of getting audited. "This is your second warning this month! One more slip-up, and you're outta here!" It's like the heavenly DMV!

But then it hit me—I'd been reading these letters through the wrong lens. Jesus isn't playing the role of a celestial Sheriff writing Church citations. Nope, the Bible tells us that the Church is, in fact, the bride of Christ! It turns out that Jesus is in a committed, long-term, and eternal love relationship with His Church (His Bride). In these letters, we're actually getting a glimpse into the heart of a loving spouse who's pouring out both praise and concerns, all for the sake of growing closer.

Think of it sort of like pre-marital counseling! Before tying the knot with Jalee, we went through pre-marital counseling. We were dead set on working through any potential roadblocks that could come between us and keep us from being a united front. Believe me, it got pretty intense at times! We went through the good, the bad, and the downright ugly (and we're still at it). We discovered each other's hurts, habits and hangups, and it was sometimes excruciating to talk about certain things. But we persevered because we were in it for the long haul.

In the same way, these letters aren't meant to bring down the hammer of condemnation but rather to foster greater intimacy. Jesus is trying to eliminate anything that could keep us from being one. He's showing us what He is looking for in a Church. He's showing us how to be a Church where He *wants* to be — a Church where God shows up. How many of you want that?

The Church in Sardis

The first letter we'll look at was written to the Church in Sardis. Sardis, which was located in what is now modern-day Turkey, was a prominent and prosperous city. It was a melting-pot of cultures and ethnicities known for its luxury and extravagance. Its patron deity was believed to be the goddess Cybele who was said to possess the power to bring the dead back to life. We aren't told who founded the Church in Sardis but it is one of the Churches Jesus writes to.

¹ *"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of My God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you,”
(Revelation 3:1-3).

Sardis reminds us, PRIORITIZE THE ETERNAL OVER THE EXTERNAL.

Our culture places more value on what is external than what is eternal. A lot of people, families, and even Churches look good from afar but are far from good. I'm sure many of you can relate to the pressures of our digital age, where families need to be picture-perfect, appearances need to be spot-on, and even our churches are expected to have a vibrant social media presence. It's not that these things are inherently wrong, but we must be on our guard against a spirituality that is only skin-deep. Church can be 30 miles wide but an inch deep.

If you're looking for a Church where you have to keep up appearances and maintain your reputation, this probably isn't the place for you. We're a bunch of crackpots. We're less about big Church and more about big people. We're a community of real people, with raw and authentic testimonies who have faith in a God that can take broken individuals and families and breathe new life into them.

Think about the Church in Sardis. Sardis was the "it" Church. They were happening! From the outside they looked alive but inside they were dead. I know it's October but I don't want to be the Church of the living dead, come on? It reminds me of that Jack Black movie, *Shallow Hal* where Jack Black could only see people for their inner beauty. That's how Jesus sees the Church. The world looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart. Sardis looked beautiful on the outside but was a rotting corpse within.

I'm excited to let you know that we have an upcoming series that will focus on living our lives for the eternal and focusing on what truly matters to God. It's a journey we'd love for you to be a part of so join us next week as we kick off our next series.

Don't focus on what is external over eternal. Let's not prioritize outward appearances over authentic faith. If you're going through a tough time, please don't hesitate to reach out. Find your community here where you can be your authentic self. I'm part of a number of text threads in the Church and I'm always moved by the level of authenticity and vulnerability people show in sharing their struggles with one another. That's where true healing begins. Remember, Jesus' encouragement to Sardis is to wake up and repent so that they wouldn't miss out on His Presence. Please don't sit on the sidelines. Join us as we pursue the eternal.

The Church in Philadelphia

The next letter was written to the Church in Philadelphia. No, not the home of Rocky Balboa, the Eagles, and Philly Cheesesteaks. This ancient city was located about 30 miles southeast of Sardis and was the home of rich agriculture and frequent earthquakes. Despite this, it was strategically placed for both trade and communication as it was a gateway Asia Minor. The Church in Philadelphia did not have the same reputation as its sister Church in Sardis but listen to what Jesus writes to this Church,

⁷ *"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept My word and have not denied My Name,” (Revelation 3:7-8).

While the Church in Sardis had a reputation for being alive, the Church in Philadelphia had the appearance of being a weaker Church. Jesus acknowledged that they were a Church of little strength, “I know that you have little strength.” We aren’t told the specifics of what this was referring to but perhaps:

- Being in a smaller city than Sardis or Laodicea, the Church in Philadelphia didn’t have equal access to resources or opportunities.
- There may have even been economic or social factors that limited the Church’s strength.
- Being in a smaller city, the Church of Philadelphia may have been smaller in size.
- Another possible factor was that the City of Philadelphia was exceptionally loyal to the Roman Empire so it could be that the Church there faced greater opposition to their faith, which may have limited their ability to grow or worship openly.

Yet despite all of the challenges that were limiting their strength, Jesus said of them, “Yet you have kept My Word and have not denied My Name.”

Jesus didn’t care about their image, He didn’t care about their reputation, He didn’t care about their influence or appearances. He looked in the depths of their hearts and applauded their faithfulness.

May we never measure our success using the superficial metrics of this world. The world says you have to have the right image, you need to know the right people, the right experiences, but these aren’t the things that move the heart of God! DL Moody famously said,

“Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at something that doesn't really matter.” - DL Moody.

My greatest fear is to stand before God having lived my life for things that don’t matter to Him. To have missed out on His will, not because I pursued bad things, but because I pursued good things at the cost of God things.

Maybe you feel like you have little strength. You may not feel as gifted as others, as knowledgeable as others, as influential as others, as visible as others. But look what Jesus promises, “If you keep My Word and do not deny My Name, I will open doors that no man can shut and I will close doors that no man can open.”

As we stand steadfast in our commitment to God, He will unlock doors that appeared impassable. He will open doors of influence that will touch countless lives. He will open the doors to His supernatural presence, ushering in miracles, signs, and wonders. He’ll open doors of transformation, of salvation, and none, not even the Devil himself, will be able to slam them shut!

The Children of the King

Long ago there were five orphans who lived in a village. One day the king of that land learned of their misfortune and decided to adopt them and have them live with him. The people of the village were dumbfounded and thought it odd that the king should adopt these children. He already had so many people to care for. "Why would the king want them?" They asked. But the king had his reasons.

The king announced that he would soon be coming to the village and everyone, especially the children, went wild with excitement. The villagers gathered the orphans to tell them what they must do. "You need to impress the king!" They exclaimed. "Only those with great gifts will be allowed to live in the castle." The people didn't know the king. They just assumed that all kings wanted to be impressed.

So the children worked long and hard preparing their offerings.

- One boy, who knew how to carve, determined to gift the king a fine work of wooden art.
- His sister decided to present the king with a painting worthy to hang in his castle.
- Another sister chose music as her way to impress the king. For long hours she practiced and villagers would often stop at her window to admire her song.
- Yet another child set out to turn the king's head with his wisdom. He studied late into the night. Surely a wise king would appreciate all his hard work.

But there was one little girl who had nothing to offer. Her hands were clumsy with the knife and stiff with the brush. She opened her mouth to sing but the sound was hoarse and she was too dull to read. She had no talent. She had no gift. All she could offer was her heart, for her heart was good. She spent her time at the village gates watching the people come and go. She would make pennies by grooming their horses or feeding their animals.

She knew each beggar by name. She took time to pet each dog and welcomed home travelers and greeted strangers. But since she had no gift she grew anxious that the king would be angry. The villagers told her that the king would want a gift so she set about trying to make one.

The girl with no gift went to each of her siblings hoping they could help but they were each too busy preparing for the king so, defeated, she returned to her place at the village gate caring for people's animals.

One day, a traveler in merchant's clothes came to the village. "Can you feed my donkey?" He asked the small girl. The girl looked into the face of the one who had travelled far. His skin was leathery from the sun and his eyes were deep. A kind smile from beneath his beard warmed the girl. "That I can!" She said. "Come sit and rest here for you must be tired from your long journey." The man closed his eyes and fell asleep. When he awoke, the girl was standing there staring at him. "What is it you seek?" He asked. "Nothing, you just seem to be a kind man and I enjoy being near you." "You are a wise girl." Said the king. "I am looking for some people but when I return we will visit more."

After a short time the man returned. "Did you find those you sought?" The girl asked. "I did, but they were all too busy for me." The man replied. "One, a wood carver told me to come back another day. The people surrounding the painter said she was not to be disturbed. One, a singer was too busy with the crowds to speak with me. And the fourth had left for another city to study."

The girl's eyes widened. "But you don't look like a king!" She gasped. "I try not to." He explained. "Being a king can be lonely. People act strange around me. They ask for favors or try to impress me. They only bring me their complaints." "But isn't that what a king is for?" The girl said. "Certainly. But there are times when I just want to be with my people. There are times when I want to talk to them and hear about their day. To laugh a bit. To cry some. There are times when I just want to be their father." "Is that why you adopted the children?" The girl asked. "Yes. Children like to talk to me. Adults try to impress me. Children just want to talk." "But my brothers and sisters were too busy." "They were. But I'll come back. Maybe they'll have time another day. Would you like to ride on my donkey to the castle?" And so it was. That the children with many talents had no time and missed the visit of the king. While the girl whose only talent was her heart became his child.

Conclusion

May we always be a Church that values God's Presence over everything else. May we always be more in love with the Giver than with the Gifts, the Healer than with the Healing, the Savior than just Salvation. If His Presence does not go before us, we don't want to go. Amen.