

Letters to the Church -Francis Chan

Day 1 of 4 • This day's reading

- Ephesians 5:29-30
- Ephesians 5:32
- Isaiah 6:2
- 1 Timothy 6:16
- 1 Peter 1:8

Devotional Sacred Mystery

I was bothered the first time I read about God killing Uzzah just because he tried to keep the ark of the covenant from falling. Uzzah touched the ark because the cart it was riding on hit a pothole (2 Sam. 6). It seemed like a trivial mistake with good intentions. Sure, God had forbidden anyone from touching the ark, but what was Uzzah supposed to do? Let the holy ark of God fall to the ground?

Then there are Ananias and Sapphira. They were both struck dead because they lied about how much money they donated to the church (Acts 5). And this is in the New Testament! Really, who hasn't exaggerated?

To top it off, Paul told the Corinthians that many of them were sick and some had even died because they celebrated Communion in

an unworthy manner (1 Cor. 11:30). If Paul wasn't exaggerating, could we be one sip away from death?

To us, many situations in Scripture involve a punishment that was too severe for the crime. But why do we feel this way?

We don't understand what it means for something to be "sacred." We live in a human-centered world among people who see themselves as the highest authority. We are quick to say things like "That isn't fair!" because we believe we deserve certain rights as humans. Yet we give little thought to the rights God deserves as God. Even in the Church we can act as though God's actions should revolve around us. The stories in Scripture are meant to show us that there exists something of greater value than our existence and rights. There are things that belong to God. Sacred things. His ark of the covenant, His command to Moses, His offerings in the temple, His Holy Spirit, His Holy Communion, His sacred Church. In all the above situations, people rushed into something sacred and paid the price. We shouldn't be surprised; we should be humbled. We have all done things more irreverent than those mentioned above. Let's thank God for His mercy and tread more carefully into sacred matters.

There is no greater honor on earth than to be part of God's Church.

When was the last time you were awestruck by the fact that you are part of Christ's body?

Have you ever marveled at this privilege?

“For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.” Ephesians 5:29–30

Every believer needs to stare at those verses long enough to be stunned. I mean really stunned. Paul referred to it as a profound mystery. If achievement is your idol, you won't make time for mystery. You will rush to the next sentence so you can finish this reading plan rather than meditate on the miracle that you are a human being who is currently joined to a God “who dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16).

“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Ephesians 5:32

Slow down long enough to marvel.

The sun is ninety-three million miles away, and you are unable to stare at it. You obviously can't touch the sun and live, so how is it possible that we are currently attached to the One who shines brighter than the sun? High angels cover themselves with their wings in His presence (Isa. 6:2), yet you are a member of His body. Why would Someone so extraordinary choose to care for you like His own arm?

Please tell me you didn't just keep reading. Please tell me you paused for even a minute to worship. You can't be that busy. It's no wonder we aren't known as those who "rejoice with joy that is inexpressible" (1 Pet. 1:8). We don't make time to meditate on His mysteries.

So, let's spend the next few days looking at some of those mysteries.

Day 2 of 4 • This day's reading

- 2 Chronicles 7:1-4
- Ephesians 2:19-22
- 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

Devotional

Mystery #1: You are a Small Piece of the Temple

One of my favorite scenes in Scripture is the dedication of the temple in 2 Chronicles 7. I wish I could have been there to see it. Imagine being alive at that moment.

Can you imagine watching fire come down from heaven? What is God's glory like? I imagine my heart pounding. I picture myself struggling to even breathe and keep from fainting. Then there's the thrill of worshipping with other believers in the middle of it all! The temple was the place where heaven intersected with earth. A glimpse of His glory was made visible to human eyes.

The New Testament describes something even greater. The fact that I covet the Old Testament experience is an indication that I don't appreciate the new reality as I should.

I would give anything to stand outside the temple and watch God's glory descend. But I get something so much better: I am literally a part of the temple itself! Somehow by the blood of Jesus, I became worthy of joining with others to form a dwelling place for God! Peter described us as "living stones." You are a stone in the same structure in which the apostles and prophets are the foundation and Jesus Himself is the cornerstone! When Paul talked about this concept, he used the plural form of you and the singular form of temple. We are all joined together to form one house for God. Somehow I am a block of a temple that transcends time and space. And because the structure is a temple, this means that God makes His home among us! You should be bursting out of your skin at this point!

Don't try to solve the mystery; just stare at it.

When Paul explained the mystery to the Corinthians, he added a terrifying warning.

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." 1

Corinthians 3:16–17

Think back to the scene in 2 Chronicles 7. When the fire came down and God's glory filled the temple, would you have considered taking a sledgehammer and striking the temple? Of course not! Then why are we so quick to gossip, slander leadership, and divide the Church?

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person.

Why is God so harsh about this? Paul explained that God's temple is sacred, and we—collectively—are that temple. Every time you speak evil about a member of the Church, it is like taking a sledgehammer to the temple. Are you sure you want to keep doing that?

Let's be careful with our words and actions. We are dealing with something sacred. Let's stay on the right side of His protection. Maybe this is why Paul said in Titus 3:10, "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him." We can't be enablers of division. God hates this sin too much. His temple is too sacred.

We live in a culture today where we are used to evaluating and giving our opinion on everything. Whether it's the pizza we ate, our Uber driver, the movie we saw, or our friend's picture on social

media, everything is set up for us to be able to critique and compare. So in the Church, rather than marveling at the incredible mystery that we are a part of God's body, we critique the leadership, the music, the programs, and anything else we can think of. We point out the flaws in our pastor's sermon with the same conviction we critique a movie star's acting or our favorite team's recent loss. Could it be that we are taking a sledgehammer to the temple in so doing?

Remember that the temple was the location where God chose to live on earth. And now the Church is that temple. We are that temple. Consider this: 2 Chronicles 7—when the temple was dedicated—was not the only time fire fell from heaven onto the temple. It also happened in Acts 2 when the Church was born. The disciples were united and praying when tongues of fire fell on them. They were the temple. Fire fell on them. And you know the rest of the story.

Day 3 of 4 • This day's reading

- Revelation 4
- Revelation 5

Devotional

Mystery #2: You are a Small Piece of Heaven

You are a part of something much bigger than yourself, something sacred. Through Jesus' sacrifice you have been joined to His Church. Because of this, you are not only a part of God's sacred temple but also a part of the heavenly community. This is huge!

Take some time to read Revelation 4–5 as it describes the scene in heaven. This section begins with a majestic picture of God on His throne. The scene is busy and intense: the four living creatures are declaring His holiness, the seven spirits of God are blazing, myriads of angels are praising Jesus with loud voices, and the twenty-four elders are flat on their faces while laying their crowns before Him. Then in 5:8, we finally appear.

“And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” Revelation 5:8

There you are! Did you see it? Those are your prayers in the bowl of incense! Isn't that awesome? We get to be part of this unbelievable scene!

Maybe you feel a bit insulted by this. You're thinking, That's it? My only part is that my prayers are lumped in with the prayers of all other believers to form a bowl of incense? Don't worry—you're also mentioned in verse 13 when your voice joins the chorus of billions.

“And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’” Revelation 5:13

What is a tremendous, unspeakable honor may feel insufficient for those who are used to being god of their own blogs and Twitter accounts. It feels insignificant to those who have erected their own shrines on Facebook and Instagram, filled with beautiful pictures of themselves.

Herein lies the danger of clamoring for attention: we don't realize that true joy comes from the opposite. Joy comes as we stand among those Jesus has redeemed and get lost in a sea of worship, becoming fully a part of something sacred.

Gathering with the Church should lead us to holy ground. You get to come and worship Someone else, with someone else. You get

to pour out love to Him by serving those around you and considering them more important than yourself. It's not about you. And you are glad it's not about you. Because this is something far greater than you. It is sacred.

Day 4 of 4 • This day's reading

- Ephesians 1:4-5
- Ephesians 3:8-10
- Jeremiah 1:5
- Ephesians 2:10

Devotional

Mystery #3: You are a Small Part of an Eternal Plan

Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that you are part of an eternal plan? Seriously think about this. Your existence didn't begin at conception. You began in the mind of God before the foundation of this earth. Meditate on this. Few things will make you feel smaller ... or bigger.

Far from being an accident, you and I are part of a brilliant plan that started before planet Earth and continues beyond it. This is why self-deprecation is as wicked as slandering God's Church. We are belittling the creation of something God has planned and crafted. He chose us before the foundation of the world, knew us before He made us (Jer. 1:5), and drew up works for us before we were even created (Eph. 2:10). He had plans for His sacred Church and included us in those plans. This thought should bring tremendous peace to our often-stressed souls. The more I think

about it, the more honored I feel to be chosen as part of God's eternal plan for the Church.

If you're not fascinated by your inclusion in His Church yet, it may help you to know that there are beings in heaven that stare at the Church in wonder. (Eph 3:8-10)

Think about what this is saying. God wanted to show the heavenly beings His incomparable wisdom ... so He created the Church! I believe we have a sacred responsibility to function as His Church in such a way that the rulers in heavenly places can marvel at God's wisdom. They ought to see a oneness in us that displays God's brilliant plan.

Two verses earlier, Paul explained that the great mystery God is now revealing is Gentiles becoming members of the same body as the Jews because of what Jesus did on the cross. This is the divine mystery that was hidden in God for ages! The grand reveal that heavenly authorities were anticipating has arrived. The curtain is drawn back, and they gasp as they see ... the Church. No way! This is unreal! Through the cross, people of every nation and tongue become members of one body? Amazing! God Himself is joining His creation and allowing them to be a part of His body? Unbelievable! This was His plan all along. There was

going to come a day when almighty God would dwell with people of all races. They would be brought to complete unity, forming one temple, which would be a dwelling place for God!

Do you see why all this matters so much? Many today treat the Church as optional, as some outdated way to connect to God that has long outlived its usefulness. They'd rather connect with God on their own, in their own way, without all the weird people making things more difficult. We can empathize with many of their feelings about the Church. But when we see the Church from God's perspective, when we appreciate it according to God's design, we're left in wonder. Who but God could come up with such a beautiful and ingenious plan?

I can't help but see our own lameness in failing to see the beauty in God's design for the Church. Heavenly beings are shocked by God's Church, while many on earth yawn. The early church didn't need the energetic music, great videos, attractive leaders, or elaborate lighting to be excited about being a part of God's body. The pure gospel was enough to put them in a place of awe.

Aren't you at least a little embarrassed that you have needed the extra stuff? It's not all your fault. For decades church leaders like myself have lost sight of the powerful mystery inherent in the

Church and have instead run to other methods to keep people interested. In all honesty, we have trained you to become addicted to lesser things. We have cheapened something sacred, and we must repent.