

LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (Revelation 2-3)

Just as Paul's epistles, though addressed to individual churches, are also intended for the entire church, so these seven messages also apply to the entire church today insofar as they are in similar situations.

This portion of Scripture has been strangely neglected. While many turn to the epistles of Paul and other portions of the New Testament for church truth, often the letters to these seven churches, though coming from Christ Himself and being climactic in character, are completely ignored. This neglect has contributed to churches today not conforming to the perfect will of God.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS (Rev. 2:1-7)

Read Revelation 2:1-7 (NIV)

****What Scholars Say****

DESTINATION

Rev. 2:1. At the time this letter was written, Ephesus was a major city of Asia Minor, a seaport, and the location of the great temple of Diana (cf. Acts 19:24,27-28,34-35), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Paul had visited Ephesus about A.D. 53, about 43 years before this letter in Revelation was sent to them. Paul remained in Ephesus for several years and preached the gospel so effectively "that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). This large city was thoroughly stirred by Paul's message (Acts 19:11-41), with the result that the silversmiths created a riot because their business of making shrines of Diana was threatened. The church accordingly had a long history and was the most prominent one in the area. The pastor or messenger of the church was addressed as the angel. This word is also used to refer to human messengers (cf. Matt 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24,27; 9:52).

Christ was holding seven stars in His right hand and walking among the seven golden lampstands. The "stars" were the angels or messengers of the churches and the "lampstands" were the seven churches (1:20).

COMMENDATION

Rev. 2:2-3. Christ commended those in the Ephesian church for their hard work...perseverance, their condemnation of wicked men, and their identification of false apostles. (False teachers were present in each of the first four churches; cf. vv. 2,6,9,14-15,20.) In addition they were commended for enduring hardships and not growing weary in serving God. In general this church had continued in its faithful service to God for more than 40 years.

REBUKE

Rev. 2:4. In spite of the many areas of commendation, the church in Ephesus was soundly rebuked: Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love. The order of words in the Greek is emphatic; the clause could be translated, "Your first love you have left." Christ used the word *agapen*, speaking of the deep kind of love that God has for people. This rebuke contrasts with what Paul wrote the Ephesians 35 years earlier, that *he never stopped giving thanks for them because of their faith in Christ and their love (agapen) for the saints* (Eph 1:15-16). Most of the Ephesian Christians were now second-generation believers, and though they had retained purity of doctrine and life and had maintained a high level of service, they were lacking in deep devotion to Christ. How the church today needs to heed this same warning, that orthodoxy and service are not enough. Christ wants believers' hearts as well as their hands and heads.

EXHORTATION

Rev. 2:5-6. The Ephesians were first reminded to remember the height from which you have fallen! They were told to repent and to return to the love they had left. Similar exhortations concerning the need for a deep love for God are frequently found in the New Testament (Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27; John 14:15,21,23; 21:15-16; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:8). Christ stated that one's love for God should be greater than his love for his closest relatives, including his father, mother, son, and daughter (Matt 10:37). Paul added that love for God should even be above one's love for his or her mate (1 Cor 7:32-35). In calling the Ephesian believers to repentance Christ was asking them to change their attitude as well as their affections. They were to continue their service not simply because it was right but because they loved Christ. He warned them that if they did not respond, the light of their witness in Ephesus would be extinguished: *I will...remove your lampstand from its place*. The church continued and was later the scene of a major church council, but after the 5th century both the church and the city declined. The immediate area has been uninhabited since the 14th century. One additional word of commendation was inserted. They were commended because they hated the practices of the Nicolaitans. There has been much speculation concerning the identity of the Nicolaitans, but the Scriptures do not specify who they were. They apparently were a sect wrong in practice and in doctrine.

PROMISE

Rev. 2:7. As in the other letters, Christ gave the Ephesian church a promise addressed to individuals who will hear. He stated, *To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God*. The tree of life, first mentioned in Gen 3:22, was in the Garden of Eden. Later it reappears in the New Jerusalem where it bears abundant fruit (Rev 22:2). Those who eat of it will never die (Gen 3:22). "The paradise of God" is probably a name for heaven (cf. Luke 23:43; 2 Cor 12:4 - the only other NT references to paradise). Apparently it will be identified with the New Jerusalem in the eternal state.

This encouragement to true love reminded them again of God's gracious provision for salvation in time and eternity. Love for God is not wrought by legalistically observing commands, but by responding to one's knowledge and appreciation of God's love.

****My Thoughts****

1. Jesus had many good things to say about the church at Ephesus. They had good deeds, hard work, perseverance, they did not tolerate those who claimed to be apostles but were not, they endured hardships for Christ and had not grown weary (Rev. 2:2-3).
2. They had this going for them: They hated the practices of the Nicolaitans which God also hated (Rev. 2:6). The Nicolaitans were probably a libertine, antinomian sect who attempted to use Christian liberty as an excuse for self-indulgence and immorality (Rev. 2:14-15). The end result being idolatry.

Let's look at two passages:

2 Peter 2:1-3 *"¹In the past there were false prophets among God's people. It is the same now. You will have some false teachers in your group. They will teach things that are wrong-teachings that will make people be lost. And those false teachers will teach in a way that will be hard for you to see that they are wrong. They will even refuse to accept the Master (Jesus) who bought their freedom. And so they will quickly destroy themselves. ²Many people will follow them in the evil (bad) things they do. And other people will say bad things about the Way of truth because of those people. ³Those false teachers only want your money. So they will use you by telling you things that are not true. But the judgment against those false teachers has been ready for a long time. And they will not escape the One (God) who will destroy them."* (Holy Bible: Easy-To-Read Version).

Jude 1:3-4

3. There are two problems that the church faced and it still faces today.
 - (a) Deny "Lordship." When you deny Him as Lord what do you do? You do whatever you want to do.
 - (b) Use grace as an excuse to practice sin. The Ephesians tested the Nicolaitans doctrine and found it to be wrong! (illustration: The Mexican witch)

4. The Ephesians mistake: In the battle to maintain sound teaching and moral and doctrinal purity, it is possible to lose a charitable spirit. In defending the faith, guard against anything that weakens love. But it was more than that, the Last Days translation puts it this way:

"But there is something about you with which I am not at all pleased: You don't love Me now as you did at first!

Look back now and remember how much you loved Me in the beginning, and realize how far you have fallen in your coldness and indifference. Turn from your coldness, and do the things you did in the beginning when your love for Me

was intense! But if you refuse to turn, I will come to you suddenly and remove your lampstand (church) from its place!

But you have this in your favor: You hate the lewd way the Nicolaitans live, which I also hate!" (Rev. 2:4-6)

(You study the picture but neglect the Person. I'm here!)

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS (Rev. 2:1-7)

****Questions****

REV 2:1 "To the angel* of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: (NIV)

1. Who was addressing John with this message? (2:1)
2. What church was the subject of this letter from Jesus? (2:1)
3. How did the speaker in this passage identify Himself? (2:1)

[2] I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. [3] You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

1. Jesus praised the church at Ephesus for what deeds? (2:2-3)
2. What did Christ say about the Ephesian church's "staying power"? (2:3)

REV 2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

1. With what in the Ephesian church was Christ unsatisfied? (2:4)

[5] Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

1. What did Christ command the church at Ephesus to remember? (2:5)
2. How did the church at Ephesus need to change? (2:5)
3. What warning was given to the church if it failed to obey Christ's words? (2:5)

[6] But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

1. What did the church at Ephesus have in its favor? (2:6)

REV 2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

1. Whom else did Jesus want to benefit from this message? (2:7)

2. What final promise was made to "him who overcomes"? (2:7)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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