



“...leaving your first love.”

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Revelation 2:1-7 1 *"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in*

the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 2 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. 4 "Nevertheless I have [this] against you, that you have left your first love. 5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. 6 "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

The apostle John now begins to share the vision before him. Seven churches are presented in the pages of chapters two and three. Other churches certainly existed at that time. So why did John...why did Christ... not address this letter to *all* churches? Clearly there was a reason, even if such is not declared. No doubt these 7 represented...and indeed *still* represent, the whole of the greater church...the totality of what Christ was seeking to frame. So seven churches, representing the “perfect/complete number,” representing all churches or rather *all the picture before us*. Christ is “setting the stage.” As we move through these churches, it becomes clear that few of them have any real promise. Most were full of compromise and/or spiritual decay. We can certainly draw a very real picture of the state of the church today.

In these church narratives, we see the patient and tenacious work of Satan. We see that he has not made an overt frontal assault on the greater church in an attempt to overwhelm his enemy. But rather, he has whittled the church down...drip by drip...over time, removing even the fundamental features that make a church a church. And we are left with something unrecognizable as biblically Christian...something that is now overtly full of apostasy. Apostasy is defection from truth, revolt against it, and abandonment of what one has professed. A departure...a desertion from one's faith and often a renunciation of it.

The thing about apostasy is that those who embrace it at one time actually were “inside” the church and turned away. That matters as we approach these 7 church accounts. That does not mean everyone in them was authentic, nor does it mean everyone in our church is born-again, authentic believers. That would be a foolish assumption.

We see, however, in verse one of chapter two, that “Christ walketh in the midst of” these seven churches. So despite their lacking, He has not deserted them! He walks among them, observing and seeking a righteous and committed fellowship. One that He can call His own. But because He does “walk amongst us,” let us never think we can ever be outside of his view... or outside of His judgment. No, He sees it all.

Some see these seven churches as representing seven periods of time in the church's evolution. This is possible, yet no one can argue that elements of each of these 7 churches are present in our age. Certainly we cannot dispute that these seven churches did exist side by side at one time, and any reasonable observer would acknowledge that the same churches exist today.

Thus, we are going to look at these churches existing as they truly are: both in John’s time, and in ours, and all points of time in-between. Each of the letters before us are written to “the angel” of each particular church. Just who these angels are, is a matter of conjecture. The word is better interpreted “messenger,” and could refer to an angelic being who is assigned to watch over a particular fellowship of believers. It could also refer to a human “under-shepherd”, a pastor or leader who had direct contact with those within the church.

1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

During the First Century AD, Ephesus had a population of possibly as many as 500,000 and was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria (Egypt). As a harbor city, it was an “international” city by default. It “imported” vast immorality and idolatry, and was devoted to the cult of Artemis (Latin: Diana). Ephesus had a temple to the “goddess,” regarded as one of the seven wonders of the world. Diana was the goddess of fertility; thus, it naturally follows that her worship involved all sorts of perversion and sexual deviance, as the temple was home to perhaps thousands of “priestesses” who were, in reality, simply prostitutes.

Despite what would seem to be overwhelming odds, the apostle Paul established a church in this city with help from Apollos, Priscilla, Aquila, Timothy, and John himself.

John again establishes the true source of this “revelation” before us. It is *“He who holds the seven stars in his right hand, he who walks among the seven golden lamp stands...”* This is, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars;

“I know your works...” is a phrase that is found in each of these letters. *“I know what you are doing.”* Christ is stating from the beginning that each church is an open book before Him, and He sees clearly the “works,” the *deeds and activities* of each fellowship mentioned. He knows every step we take, individually and as a community. He is, as always, a righteous and perfect judge of the state of an individual, a church, and mankind as a whole.

He, Jesus Christ, states He is aware of their *works*, their *labors*, and their *patience*. This church was apparently known for its works...its service. I’m sure that there were many meetings and gatherings each week, and more outreaches than you could count. The word “labors” in the original speaks of a work unto the point of exhaustion. They weren’t just busy, they were wearing themselves out! These folks were “engaged” to say the least. They were all in. Committed. Invested! They righteously were a hardworking and enduring church. They

were still in the game... still throwing down. All of this would have elicited a righteous pat on the back and a rowdy “high five.”

They not only brought the *offense* but also engaged in the *defense*. They are unwilling to put up with evil in their midst. This was not a church that “looked the other way” on sin. They didn’t play both sides. They believed in and practiced holiness. They took their spiritual walk seriously. They held their leaders’ feet to the fire. They didn’t put up with milktoast pastors. They didn’t grow tired. They didn’t retire from service. They never quit.

Jesus has no complaint as far as their diligence in these areas are concerned. He recognizes their attributes and commitment; how they readily dealt with those who claimed to be sent from God, but in reality, were not.

We remember how Paul warned the church elders on his final departure that wolves would arise even from among the church. They would have to be alert and discerning toward those who would try to lead them. Their commitment to holiness drove them to diligence. They held their leaders to a proper standard.

3 "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary.

This church is commended for their endurance through trials, tribulations, and persecution. They stood firm and kept working. They were vigilant and did not back down even through the tough times. I’m sure verses 2 and 3 represent an approval...an endorsement we would all love to receive. How we long to have such an assessment from our Lord!

4 "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love..

Despite all of the great attributes and accolades, they still had a glaring issue that in truth rendered all the rest null and void. They had apparently become so involved with *doing*, that they forgot that they were first to be *loving*. The Lord’s issue with this church is very strong, as evidenced in the original language.

Despite all their activities, all their “busyness,” they had failed to keep their eyes on the prize. They were caught up in all the activities of church, while they forgot the focus of it all. We must stop and remember that God is interested not just in what we *do*, but *why we do it*. What’s the motivation behind what we do? Where is our hearts?

Clearly our God is not easily impressed by a shiny exterior. He looks behind all of the hubbub...behind all of the meetings, the gatherings, the outreaches, and the production. Make no mistake...it seems that “out on the street” this church was rocking. But it all was merely motion without proper *emotion*. There was activity, but it lacked the passion that Christ desired. And a love and passion that was not just *toward* God...something that can be difficult to quantify and qualify...but a love and passion for each other as well as the church as a body...the church as a vehicle for the kingdom’s glory. The problem wasn’t that they failed to *do*, but rather they failed to *love*.

We have every reason to believe that this church started out on the right foot. They began with zeal, passion, and a simple love that encompassed everything they did. Yet apparently that love for Christ, love for each other, and love for that church no longer drove them. What do you think drove them at this point? What motivates us once the love is gone?

Certainly, we can do a lot because of habit...because of guilt or routine. This is what we “do” now. This is my life. This is my world. I do these things because I have seemingly always done them. I caught a wave and just never got off. But is that enough? Apparently not for Jesus.

All of this is born from the idea that God somehow needs us. That the kingdom will only be furthered if we do this outreach, if we go on this mission trip, if we do our church service. Unless we do all these things, the faith will cease to advance, and it all will fall apart. But we are clearly told that when it comes to His church, the “gates of hell will not prevail against it.” If that’s true, it is clear that you and I aren’t going to save it or bring it to an end!

Jesus was pleased with the effort. Kudos for the work, praise for the service. But *nevertheless*...

Nevertheless, you have lost something. You had it once, or you could never have lost it. But now it's gone, and I'm not sure anyone has even noticed. Clearly, Jesus doesn't *need* us, no matter how much He may *want* us. He wants us to do all that stuff *with* Him, not *for* Him.

I wonder if each of us today has clarity about our motivations. Do you know why you are here? Why do you serve? Why do you participate?

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5 that “If it seems we are crazy, it is to bring glory to God. And if we are in our right minds, it is for your benefit. Either way, Christ’s love controls us...” NKJV says it is “the love of Christ which compels us...” Our “mo” is love.

In a strange irony, this Ephesus church was thought to be just short of 40 years old at this point. For nearly forty years they had been the point of the spear...the first to come and the last to leave. But quietly...subtly... their motivations had changed. And they no doubt never even noticed because they were still *doing* what they had always been *doing*. Now it's my *responsibility*. My *duty*. My *job*.

I hope you are here today...I hope you are a part of this community...because you are in love with Jesus and you love the person next to you. I hope it is because you are passionate to learn...passionate to worship, because the bottom line is that nothing else is acceptable to God. No other reasons will suffice. No other motivation will do it.

Some of us here in this fellowship have become weary. The joy in your service is missing now. The awe of what God is doing here is taken for granted, even though it used to wow you. Your life in general has quieted down...it has found a “pace.” A rhythm. A steady beat.

5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

Despite their zeal and activity, they had forgotten their purpose and motivation. In perfect “Jesus-style,” our Lord does not write them off, but as He always does, He calls them to repentance. He calls them to “go back” to where they had set down their first love, and to pick Him up once again. To “remember...”

Many folks over the years have found themselves in this state of life, and their answer seems to always be “My heart is wrong, so I am going to stop serving and participating until I can get my head on straight.” But is that the counsel of Christ herein? No. His answer is to “remember” ... “repent”...and “do”...moreover, do the first stuff again.” Go back to your roots. Find your mojo again. Go back and get that first love...that “honeymoon passion” you had. Remember how He found you and how He let you onto the field of play.

Repentance means to “change and to turn.” Those in Ephesus needed to “go back” to where they had turned away and to begin again. Their *hearts* may have been right, but their *minds* and *bodies* were amiss.

The church is by nature a light to a dark world. Unless such fellowships turn back to their “first love,” they are told they will be removed as a church “light.” As we see the city of Ephesus (in the country of Turkey) today, lost in the cloud of Islam, that church has indeed been removed. No less is promised to any fellowship that is not diligent to keep their love of Christ first in the church.

“do the first works...”

Notice that the instructional remedy for this misguided energy is not to tell those around us to *“be warmed and filled.”* Often, people use passages like this to excuse themselves and to give themselves license to sit at home and watch TV while claiming to love their brothers and sisters.

The manifestation of this love is still to *do*, but to do *the “first works”* of our faith. Those things we did when we were first saved, motivated by our love for Jesus and our love for our brother. For this “first love” is as much a love for each other as it is for our Savior.

6 "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Just who these Nicolaitans were or are, is certainly in question. We might guess or question through the many conjectures that are out there. Perhaps they were an early church sect that had ventured off the beaten path, or a reference to misguided clergy. To attempt to make a doctrinal stance on such a guess, would be misguided as well as inappropriate.

What we *can* gather is probably found in verse two, which mentions that those in this church despised those who presented themselves as “messengers of God” but were in fact nothing more than pseudo-apostles. The first of a long list of priestly “wanna-be’s.” No doubt if they’d had television in the apostle John’s day, you would have found these Nicolaitans there in all of their “glory.”

Paul also warned of their arrival. See 2Cor 11:13-15

7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

With the words of His earthly ministry still echoing through time, Jesus once again calls upon all those who would *“hear what the Spirit says.”*

For some *overcome*, ...and some *are overcome*. The latter is lost. Not the loss of their salvation, for *“They went out from us, but they didn’t belong to us.”* Their failure to continue the battle only showed that they were never changed, never born again, and never saved in the first place.

But for the individual who *is* indeed born again and proves it by the fact that he *overcomes* all that spiritually stands in his way, he will be awarded the gift of eternal life. Endurance is not the *path* to salvation; it is the path of *those that are saved*.

The irony is that this church was approaching 40 years...just as we are approaching 40 years. It was time for them to “remember” how they got there and *why* they got there. It was time to “reboot.” What about us after our forty years? It’s been said that the first generation knows God and His power. The second generation knows God but really not His power. And the third generation often knows neither. Who will we be? Who will *you* be?

After nearly 40 years of ministry here, we cannot brush this exhortation aside. Already many who began the race have retired by the seaside somewhere, and are no longer engaged. They grew tired. They began to take it all for granted. They grew unthankful. They lost their “awe.”

But I remember. I remember everything. I stand in wonder at what has occurred here in this church. Let us “do the first works again.”