

AVOIDING SPIRITUAL PITFALLS

LESSONS FROM THE SEVEN LETTERS IN REVELATION

SESSION TWO: EPHEBUS: PITFALL OF LOST LOVE

Rev 2: 1 – 7: To the church in Ephesus

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 lamp stands: **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. **4**Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. **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. **6**But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices 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 the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

The letters to Seven Churches follow this pattern.

The Centrality of Christ: Avoiding 'Christ-Misplaced'

The Affirmation: Avoiding 'Negative-Focused'

The Fault Line: Avoiding 'Arrogance-Ignored'

The Exhortation: Avoiding 'Recovery-Failure'

The Promise: Avoiding 'Hope-Rejected'

A. Introduction

1. The City

Ephesus is an important city, a commercial center, one of the most influential centers in Asia Minor. It is also home to one of the seven wonders of the world, the temple to the powerful Greek fertility goddess, Artemis (Diana). Alongside this, there are other temples dedicated to Roman deities, like Athena, Dionysis, Demeter, Cybele.

It has become more powerful than Pergamum politically and more favored than Smyrna for the imperial cult.ⁱ

At Ephesus, Emperor Augustus had build two temples in his honor and Domitian had named Ephesus 'guardian' of the imperial cult, making it the foremost center of imperial cult worship in Romeⁱⁱ.

Ephesus honored Domitian at the Olympic Games before the book was written. It was known also for the practice of magic (Acts 19: 13-19).

2. The Church

The church was founded by Paul (Acts 19: 1-7, 10; 20: 31) and nurtured by Timothy (1 Tim 1: 18).

Paul has already expressed the fear that 'ravage wolves' may come into the Ephesian church to destroy it. (Acts 20: 29, 30) By 90 AD, false teachers and apostles were hardly surprising and already present in the church (Acts 20: 29-30; 1 Tim 1: 3-7; Rev 2: 2)

Ephesus was the church where John was the bishop for many years. The character of the church was the character of the leader. John was the 'son of thunder' as well as the 'apostle of love'ⁱⁱⁱ. He refused to live under the same roof as the heretic Cerinthus and on the other hand, his singular, dominant message was 'Little children, love one another.'^{iv}

B. Observation and Interpretation

1. The Centrality of Christ

v. 1 "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands"

The first description of Christ is 'one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands.'

Each description of Christ is appropriate and relevant to the context in which the church operates. Christ is represented as the One who holds all the guardians/leaders of the church in His hand. He takes care of all the leaders.

Also, He lives among the churches, even though they are fractured and not perfect. Walking among the churches suggests:

- * Observing their lives and behavior. He knows what is going on.
- * Appreciating the good things that are happening in the churches. He is catching them doing right.
- * Correcting what is wrong in the churches, as He walks among them.
- * Encouraging them to recover.
- * Promising them hope that will not be in vain.

2. The Affirmation

v 2, 3 "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. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."

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

Christ commends the church for their behavior, their diligence and their doggedness.

There are four positive and highly commendable aspects about the Ephesian Church.

1. The church works hard.
2. The church is persevering.
3. The church cannot tolerate wicked men and not without reason: 'they have tested...and found them false'
4. The church has endured hardships for Christ's sake and has not grown tired.

Who are the Nicolaitans?

There are four possibilities:

- a. The identification of Nicolas (Acts 6:5) by the church father, Irenaeus
- b. The association with antinomian Gnosticism
- c. The heretics who prosecute from the outside, like the 'Jews' of Rev 2: 9
- d. The Balaamites – those who condone immorality and eating of food offered to idols(Rev 2: 14, 15)

The Church in Ephesus is commended for hating the Nicolaitans. Their condemnation of these false teachers is worthy of Christ's commendation.

3. The Fault Line

Vv 4, 5 *"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen!"*

Every church, even every Christian, has fault lines. The Ephesian Church's fault line is forsaking their first love.

In the books of Acts and Ephesians, the church is characterized by love and zeal.

Ephesus is the mother church of the whole of Asia. Though she endures long suffering, she will not endure false doctrine either from evil men or from Nicolaitans. In their zeal and keenness for truth, they have 'lost their first love.' The fatal flaw in their behavior is their lack of love.

The loss of first love is like the language of marriage used in Jeremiah 2:5 - the straying away from the Lord. A consequence of this is the breakdown and disintegration of interpersonal harmony within the community.

GK Beale offers an alternative suggestion: it refers to their lack of love for Christ in bearing witness to the world. It has a reference to the 'lamp stand', an allusion to the shining forth the light of Christ (cf Rev 11: 3-7) and the self-description of Christ in Rev 1: 1b.

The connection of growing cold in love and bearing witness is closely inter-related. If we are not refreshed by love, we will not bear witness to that love. Hence, the indictment against the Ephesian church is that they have been so focused on cleaning up their doctrines internally that they have very little concern for people externally.

The forsaking of 'first love' is often interpreted in a few ways:

1. Waning of their love for Christ
2. Diminishing in their love for each other
3. Declining love for Christ resulting in failure to shine for Him

The Ephesian's fault line is:

- Rules are more important than relationship
- Right is more important than redemption
- Results are more important than re-engagement
- Returns are more than rest

4. The Exhortation

v 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 lamp stand from its place.

Therefore, the church needs to repent of this. Such a failure is all too possible for Christians. We are often valiant for truth but forget that we should also have great heart as well.

The evil is not without but within the Church. It is the church that will destroy itself, if they do not repent. We need to do the things we did at first.

It is an exhortation to remember and do the things we did when we first started. If the imagery is that of marriage, the call is for us to remember how we were first madly in love and how we were so exuberant about each other when we first got married.

Similarly, the church is encouraged and exhorted to love Christ as we first knew Him and then demonstrate our love by testifying our love for Him.

The opportunity to turn around is always there. God is a God of second chances. He offers us to turn to Him again.

If we do not, when we fall, great will be the collapse. The city of Ephesus was literally removed 3 km from where it was in John's day.

If the church does not refresh its love for Christ and refrain from testifying of His love, the church will soon lose its identity and its place in history.

The sad truth is that the Ephesian Church was gone within 50 years.

5. The Promise

V7*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.*

The call to listen is given to every church. The importance of listening has been dealt with in the first session (Please see notes from Session One).

The promise to those who overcome: they will eat from the tree of life. The warning is that if they don't repent and turn back to their first love, the church may be removed as lamp stand. This is even more impactful since the lamp stand represents the 'tree of life' in the Old Testament.

C. Application

1. God is holding and keeping our leaders. What part should we play to hold and keep our leaders?
2. In what ways can we be like the Church in Ephesus that we are so right and yet so wrong?
3. Why is it so easy for us to lose our first love? How can we keep our love for Christ, for one another and for those who do not know Him fresh?
4. How can we make repentance a part of our constant recovery process?

ⁱ Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

ⁱⁱ Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today. 1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

^{iv} Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today. 1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.