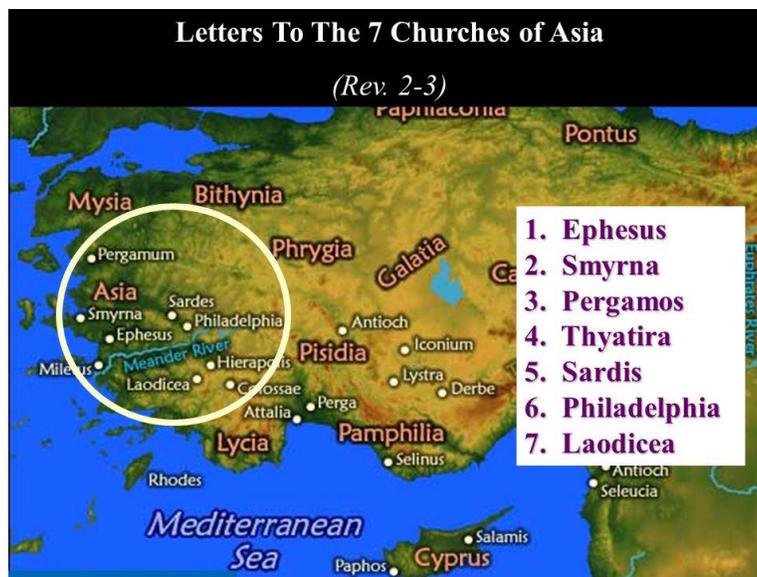


# THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS

## INTRODUCTION

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- Revelation 2-3 constitute the second major division of Revelation
- Three major sections give a basic chronological framework for the book
- These three divisions are identified in Revelation 1:19 ~ Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.
  - “the things which you have seen” = chapter 1 (past)
  - “the things which are” = chapters 2-3 (present)
  - “the things which will take place after these things” = chapters 4-22 (future)
- Revelation 2-3 contain Christ’s words to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev 1:4), congregations located in what is modern-day Turkey
- These 7 churches were actual churches in existence when John wrote, churches founded as a result of Paul’s missionary journeys
- The whole book of Revelation is a circular letter addressed to those churches, named probably in the order in which they would be visited by a messenger on the postal route starting from Patmos and traveling on a circular route around the province of Asia (cf. Rev 1:11)



- There were likely other churches in this area (i.e. Colossae) but it is likely that these 7 were chosen for a number of reasons:
  - The number 7 is the number of completeness
  - Each church illustrates conditions common in local churches at that times as well as throughout history
    - Thus, they represent the various conditions found in all churches, past and present and future
    - Therefore, what is said of these churches is relevant to us as well in that they were examples that would be repeated by subsequent churches, including those across the world today
    - The issues that corrupted the first century church are the same threats facing the church today

- Thus, these letters stand as a warning to all churches at all times and provide suitable admonitions to church in various states of spiritual need
- Additionally, since churches are made up of individuals, these exhortations serve as warnings to individual believers
- The 7 churches represent a chronological development of church history viewed spiritually?
  - Some commentators “note that Ephesus seems to be characteristic of the Apostolic Period in general and that the progression of evil climaxing in Laodicea seems to indicate the final state of apostasy of the church. This point of view is postulated upon a providential arrangement of these churches not only in a geographical order but by divine purpose, presenting also a progress of Christian experience corresponding to church history...What is claimed is that there does seem to be a remarkable progression in the messages. It would seem almost incredible that such a progression should be a pure accident, and the order of the messages to the churches seems to be divinely selected to give prophetically the main movement of church history.”<sup>1</sup>
- Christ’s instructions to these 7 churches signal the continual need for the church to repent and be reformed
- Spiritual deadness, apostasy, doctrinal compromise, immorality, defection from the authority of God’s Word, false teaching, flirting with the world, and lack of love for Christ within the church serve as evidence that what plagued the early church also plagues the contemporary church
- If the church is going to be “salt and light” to the world (Matt 5:13-16) and the “pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15) as it should be, it must be distinguishable from the world
- If the church today will maintain its doctrinal integrity and moral purity, it must heed Christ’s call in Revelation 2-3 to reform the church
- The numerous calls by Christ for the church to repent underscore this reality: Rev 2:5; 2:16; 2:22; 3:3; 3:19
- “These were not casual, dispassionate warnings. Each call to repentance was accompanied by the devastating consequences that awaited if a church failed to reform. In that sense, what John saw and heard was the fulfillment of Peter’s words decades earlier in his first epistle: “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God” (1 Peter 4:17). Like Paul, Peter knew the many looming spiritual dangers that threatened the church, even from within. He also knew that churches would in some cases succumb to temptations, false doctrines, the lure of the world, or the assaults of the Evil One. Peter called his readers to persevere under persecution, which he saw in part as God’s judgment against the unfaithful church. Moreover, Peter understood that this is how God always operates with His people.”<sup>2</sup>
- “It makes us uncomfortable to think about God calling His church to repent and reform, and threatening them with judgment if they don’t. But it is critically important that we heed the warnings Christ delivers to us through the pen of John in Revelation.”<sup>3</sup>
- “Many of the evils and shortcomings which exist in the church today are a direct outgrowth of neglect of the solemn instruction given to these seven churches.”<sup>4</sup>
- The letters to the churches each follow the same format:
  - Each starts with an introduction in which Christ is described
  - Each begins with the expression “I know your works” (or some variation)
  - Most contain words of commendation and warnings as well as promises to those who respond
  - Each offers a promise “to him who overcomes”
  - Each concludes with the phrase “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”

## THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS – THE LOVELESS CHURCH

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<sup>1</sup> John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Christ’s Call to Reform the Church*, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 51.

**Revelation 2:1-7** ~ To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 2 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. 6 Yet this you do 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 grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'



## Background

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- Ephesus was the mother church for the other 6 churches in that region because Ephesus was the center of Asia Minor
- It was located 3 miles from the harbor where the Cayster River opened up into the Aegean Sea
- The harbor is gone today, buried under miles of silt from the river that filled it in
- Because of the harbor and the fact that it sat at the convergence of 4 major trade routes, the city was the political and commercial center of the region
- Merchants flocked to Ephesus, which became a melting pot of nations and ethnic groups
- It had a stadium for sports and the largest of all Greek open-air theaters was there, holding 25,000 spectators



- As a result, the city was dominated by worldliness, wickedness, debauchery, and idolatry
- Highlighting this pagan culture was the Temple of Diana/Artemis, one of the 7 Wonders of the World
- Diana was the goddess of fertility, sex, and reproduction and a temple was erected in Ephesus to worship her
- “The worship of Ephesus’ Diana was sensuous beyond description. She had scores of eunuchs and thousands of priestesses and temple prostitutes. The worship was a kind of fanatic hysteria in which the people worked themselves up into terrible frenzies and then committed shameless acts of sexual mutilation. All of the symbols of sexuality were worshipped.”<sup>5</sup>
- The Greek philosopher Heraclitus described life in Ephesus in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC this way: “The inhabitants of Ephesus were fit only to be drowned and the reason I can never laugh or smile is because I live amid such terrible uncleanness.”



- Despite its pagan roots, a church was planted there, likely under the leadership of Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18-19)
- They were later joined by Apollos (Acts 18:24-26)
- Paul visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey and returned on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:1-7), finding a group of John the Baptist’s disciples, whom Paul led to the Lord
- These 12 believers became the nucleus of the Ephesian church
- Paul stayed in Ephesus for 3 years, ministering to the people and teaching them the Word such that “all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:10)
- It was during this time that the other churches in Asia Minor were planted
- Many came to Christ such that those involved in magic and evil practices stopped (Acts 19:19)
- The word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing in Ephesus (Acts 19:20)
- As a result, Demetrius, a silversmith who made a large amount of money making and selling idols, incited a riot because the progress of the gospel was putting a dent in his business (Acts 19:21-41)
- For a number of years the church in Ephesus flourished, first under Paul, then under Timothy (1 Tim 1:3), Onesiphorus (2 Tim 1:16, 18), Tychicus (2 Tim 4:12), and then John
- They were a solid church in that Paul even commended them for their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for the saints (Eph 1:15)

<sup>5</sup> Jack MacArthur, *Revelation*, 39.

- But Paul had warned them about threats they would face after his departure:

**Acts 20:28-31** ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

- Despite these warnings and in spite of all their success as a church, over time their faith in and love for Christ began to wane
- At the time Revelation was written, the church was in its second generation...about 30-40 years after being founded
- A new generation had risen in Ephesus that were still strong in certain areas, but they did not possess an intense love for Christ
- The letter is addressed “to the angel of the church in Ephesus” (2:1; cf. 1:20)
- “angel” (*angelos*) does often refer to angels; however, it can also refer to human messengers which is likely its usage here
- This messenger was probably the pastor or a key leader in the church through whom the message was to be delivered to the people in the congregation
- Christ (“the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven lampstands” – cf. 1:12-13) personally gave John this message to deliver to the church in Ephesus, reminding us of His divine omniscience of and sovereign authority over His church

## Commendation

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- Overall, the church at Ephesus was a very faithful church
- There were some incredible things happening in the church and with the people that shows that they had served the Lord well
- The people were very busy with the things of the Kingdom
- Jesus gives them a glowing report...a 4.0 GPA...a straight "A" report card from the Lord

### *Their Deeds*

**Revelation 2:2** ~ I know your deeds

- They were known for a number of good works
- They showed that their faith was the real thing in their actions
- They realized that they were saved for good works (Eph 2:10) and lived accordingly

### *Their Labor*

**Revelation 2:2** ~ I know your toil

- The word “toil” is *kopos* which means “wearisome work, exertion to the point of exhaustion, the kind of word that drains you”
- The word suggests sacrifice, putting blood and sweat into one’s work
- This was a church that toiled for the sake of the kingdom and they determined that they were not going to give God what did not cost them something
- They worked hard for the cause of Christ, expending themselves for the sake of the Gospel

- They were not just spectators; rather, they labored diligently, staying busy and active in service to Christ

### ***Their Perseverance***

**Revelation 2:2** ~ I know your perseverance

- The word “perseverance” is *hupomone* which means “to bear up under, a patient endurance, to remain under”
- It refers to the willingness and steadfastness to accept hardship, suffering, and trials in the Christian life
- It describes an attitude of eagerly persisting in the face of difficulties and opposition
- The Ephesians were not quitters; rather, they remained true and braved against temptations, hindrances, and other distractions to keep working hard for the Kingdom
- Despite difficult circumstances they remained faithful to the Lord

### ***Their Discernment***

**Revelation 2:2** ~ I know that...you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false

- They faithfully guarded against Satan’s attempts to infiltrate their church, fighting for its purity by getting tough on sin and holding fast to the truth
- They hated evil as much as God hates evil
- This group was not concerned about people’s opinions or someone’s experience, but only with what the Word of God said
- This church had doctrinal integrity and were very concerned about who taught and what they taught
- They tested anyone who claimed to speak for the Lord and had the guts to confront false teachers
- This was something Paul had urged Timothy to do previously: 1 Timothy 1:3 ~ As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines
- The Ephesians had done this well, something they were specifically commended for in vs. 6 ~ Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate
- Early church tradition says that the Nicolaitans were a group started by Nicolas, a Jewish proselyte who was one of the men picked to be one of the first Deacons in Acts 6:5.
- Later he apostacized, formed a cult, and became known for engaging in worldly indulgences and teaching that sexual immorality was a Christ-pleasing practice
- But the Ephesians would have nothing to do with those false teachers as they stood firmly on the truth of Scripture
- They hated anything that distorted the purity of biblical truth
- “Where did they get such commendable discernment? From being well versed in God’s truth. This was a very well-taught church. They sat under the tutelage of some of the sharpest and most godly minds in the early church. But they didn’t rest on that legacy; they didn’t assume their heritage alone would protect them. They put into practice the principles and doctrines handed down to them, and they faithfully guarded the church from the constant onslaught of false teaching.”<sup>6</sup>

### ***Their Endurance***

**Revelation 2:3** ~ and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary.

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<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur, 63

- The Ephesians toiled, labored, and persevered for the sake of the Gospel
- They guarded the purity of the church and were vigilant to protect God's people against false teaching
- They had not grown weary in doing so and never entertained the idea of giving up
- Why? → Because of the name of Christ was at stake!
- Their supreme motivation for living with such integrity and steadfastness was because the glory of Christ and the testimony of His Gospel were the driving force behind their church
- They looked like the exemplary church, maybe even candidates for the "Church of the Year" award
- What is MBC known for? What about you?

## Condemnation

**Revelation 2:4** ~ But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

- Despite the glowing commendation from Christ, there was a fatal flaw in the church at Ephesus
- In one brief statement, Christ isolates the critical problem in the Ephesian church
- Literally, he says "Your first love, you have left" with "first love" in the emphatic position
- Their relationship with Christ had degenerated into something mechanical, giving way to a lifeless and formal orthodoxy
- The white-hot, fervent love for Christ that had once characterized the early Ephesian church had cooled over 40 years so that it was virtually non-existent
- Their service to the Lord was not compelled by a fiery love but rather by a mechanical piety
- Despite its outwardly robust appearance, a deadly spiritual cancer was growing at the heart of the Ephesian church
- Though they had not departed completely, their love for Christ no longer had the fervency and depth it once had
- What does it mean to leave your first love?
- First, it means that Christ is not **the** priority anymore
- The word "first" (*protos*) means first in priority, not first in time...it is the thing to which everything else is secondary
- To forsake one's first love is to treat our Christ as one goal, but no longer as **the** only goal
- It occurs when Christ becomes one priority among many instead of being **the** priority
- The Ephesians were busy doing spiritual things but Christ Himself was not their passion and their desire
- It's interesting to note that those in the Ephesian church at the time John was writing were 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation believers
- The church was 30-40 years old when John wrote Revelation and those in the church had not gone through what those in the 1<sup>st</sup> generation did
- Often those who grow up in the church can lose the warmth of affection for Christ the first generation had
- Second, it means that Christ is replaced with a program
- The Ephesians were doing the right things, but they lost Christ in the midst of their Christianity
- The activities they were engaged in were all good, but loving Christ in the midst of all those activities was absent
- Their problem was not with their heads, but with their hearts...their hearts were no longer ravished with the wonder and preciousness of Christ
- This happens when the Savior is replaced with a system, a relationship is replaced with a routine, the Master is replaced by ministry

- The death of first love of Jesus Christ is the greatest tragedy in the life of a Christian!
- “When we lose our first love, our testimony is destroyed – broken like a light bulb. The purpose, direction, and motivation of our Christian life are gone. Our Christian life becomes like a body without a heart. If that first love is lost, then literally everything is lost, and soon we are left in the cold, white ashes of a useless, past experience. When we lose our first love of Jesus Christ, we lose the joy of fellowship with God.”<sup>7</sup>
- “This is a danger for every believer, and every church – particularly those like Ephesus, that can easily slip into loveless patterns of piety and service. Just as we need to toil at the work of God’s kingdom, we need to work to fan the flames of our love for His Son. We must not be satisfied with cold-hearted, robotic service rendered unto Him. We cannot allow our hearts to cool toward our Savior. The cost is far too high.”<sup>8</sup>
- “Thus it has ever been in the history of the church: first, a cooling of spiritual love, then the love of God replaced by a love for the things of the world, with resulting compromise and spiritual corruption. This is followed by departure from the faith and loss of effective spiritual testimony.”<sup>9</sup>
- Anything that hinders true love for God causes believers to lose their first love
- Scripture always condemns this kind of empty, religious existence:
  - Jews in the OT: Jeremiah 2:1-13
  - Pharisees in the NT: Matthew 15:1-9
- Love for Christ turned cold is the forerunner of spiritual apathy
- Christ does not desire to be known with the mind, but to be treasured with the heart
- Love for God is the mark of a genuine Christian and the truest measure of our commitment to Him:

**Matthew 22:37-38** ~ And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND. 38 This is the great and foremost commandment.”

**Matthew 10:37** ~ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

**John 14:21, 23** ~ He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him...” 23 Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.

- We will never love Christ perfectly in this life and our love for Him will fluctuate
- But our love for Christ must be carefully guarded or it will diminish over time
- A declining love for Christ is a severe danger and may often reveal simply a “cosmetic Christianity”

## **Correction**

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**Revelation 2:5** ~ Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.

### ***Step 1 - Remember***

- Christ says that to correct any departure from God, the first step is to go back to the place of departure
- Christ exhorts the Ephesians to remember the love that once gripped their hearts, the wonder of their newfound salvation, and the joy and satisfaction that were theirs in Christ

<sup>7</sup> Jack MacArthur, *Revelation*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, *Christ’s Call*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Walvoord, 56.

- “Those that have lost their first love *must remember whence they have fallen*; they must compare their present with their former state, and consider how much better it was with them then than now, how much peace, strength, purity, and pleasure they have lost, by leaving their first love,—how much more comfortably they could lie down and sleep at night,—how much more cheerfully they could awake in the morning,—how much better they could bear afflictions, and how much more becomingly they could enjoy the favours of Providence,—how much easier the thoughts of death were to them, and how much stronger their desires and hopes of heaven.”<sup>10</sup>

### ***Step 2 - Repent***

- “repent” = *metanoeo* = to change the mind
- Christ calls for a decisive change of attitude about their lovelessness...for a reversal of the current situation
- This is a call to confess a cold heart to the Lord...to acknowledge that He has not been the priority...to confess a divided heart...to ask Him to help jettison the excess baggage that has been picked up along the way and once again give Christ first place
- This is a call to break the cycle of lifeless, mechanical service to the Lord

### ***Step 3 – Return***

- Christ tells them to go back step by step until they come to the place where they took the first false step
- He says to go back and do what they did when they first set out on the path of pursuing Christ
- He says to go back to their first devotion to Christ
- He says to return to the basics of living the Christian life – applying the Word in every situation... confessing sin...engaging in prayer...depending on Him
- Recovering Christ as first love is as simple as returning to walking closely with Him on a daily basis
- To fail to respond this way would bring Christ’s discipline upon the church: vs. 5 ~ or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.
- The lampstand represented the life of the church
- To remove the lampstand refers to them ceasing to exist as a church resulting from Christ’s judgment
- Unfortunately, that’s what happened to the church at Ephesus as there is no longer a church there, not even a city
- For centuries in that part of Asia, no lampstand has been burning for Christ
- In that same city where Paul once labored night and day for 3 years, no testimony for Christ can be heard
- Christ’s final words to the church at Ephesus demonstrate that this warning is for all believers and all churches at all times: vs. 7 ~ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.
- All who heed these instructions will “overcome” and will be rewarded with a home with Christ for eternity
- They will eat of the “tree of life” which appeared in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:9) and will appear again in the future (Rev 22:2, 14, 19), symbolizing eternal life with God in heaven

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<sup>10</sup> Henry, M. (1994). [\*Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume\*](#) (p. 2465). Peabody: Hendrickson.