

## The Church in Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7 (NASB)

*"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:*

*<sup>2</sup>'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; <sup>3</sup>and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup>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.'*

### Introduction

Starting today, for the next seven Sundays, I am going to preach a sermon series on the Book of Revelation. Not the entire book, but two chapters, Chapter 2 and 3. Why those two chapters? Because those two chapters focus on Christ's letters to seven churches in the first century in Roman Asia (or Asia Minor, modern day western Turkey—look at the map in the bulletin insert). I believe the same Christ still sends His letters to the churches in America. I pray that we will learn a lesson or two from Jesus' message to the Church in Ephesus this morning. Let me begin with some background information.

**Ephesus:** The city came under the control of the Roman Republic in 129 B.C. It was famous in its day for the nearby Temple of Artemis (the ancient Greek goddess of the hunt and nature) which has been designated one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It also had a theatre capable of holding 24,000 spectators <sup>1</sup> FYI: Colosseum in Rome could hold up to 50,000 people.

### The Church in Ephesus:

By the time this letter was written, the Church in Ephesus was forty some years old. It was one of the most vibrant congregations in the region. First, it was founded by Paul the Apostle and ministered by him for several years. Next, there was a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit that shook the entire city, which almost destroyed the silversmith business for Artemis. It was recorded in Acts 19: 17-20: *"<sup>17</sup> This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. <sup>18</sup> Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their*

practices. <sup>19</sup> And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver (approximately \$6 million in today's term<sup>2</sup>) <sup>20</sup> So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing."

40 some years before this letter, in his farewell speech, Paul warned the elders of the church of the upcoming danger in the church. He said to them, "<sup>29</sup>I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. <sup>30</sup>Even **from your own number** men will arise and distort the truth **in order to draw away disciples after them.** <sup>31</sup>So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:29-31). Paul's warning came true in the Ephesian Church by the time of this letter. False teachers arose among them and distorted the biblical truth to draw away disciples after them. Their teaching was called 'Gnosticism.' I will speak about it later.

**John the Apostle** (6–100 A.D.), the youngest of 12 disciples of Jesus.

In his late years He was banished to an island called Patmos: "<sup>9</sup> I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9). The banishment happened after he had survived all the persecutions against Christians during the reign of Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.). The story goes on: In the throes of persecution, John had been "plunged into boiling oil in Rome and suffering nothing from it. It is said that all in the audience of Colosseum were converted to Christianity upon witnessing this miracle."<sup>3</sup>

"He is said to have lived to old age, dying of natural causes at Ephesus sometime after AD 98, during the reign of Trajan, thus becoming the only apostle who did not die as a martyr."<sup>4</sup> In fact, he was the one whom Jesus told that he would remain alive until He returns (John 21:22-23): <sup>22</sup> Jesus \*said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" <sup>23</sup> Therefore this account went out among the brothers, that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?"

**Patmos:** It is a small island in Aegean Sea whose area is 13.15 sq. mi. (whereas that of Stafford Township is 54.83 sq. mi.) In 2021, its population was 3,283.<sup>5</sup> Back in the time of John, far less than 3,000 lived there.

## Content

Let us go over verse by verse.

v. 1: *"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:*

The letter was written to the angel of the Church in Ephesus, not to the leaders or people. By the way, who is the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands? Of course, it is Jesus the Christ. What are the seven stars and seven lampstands referring to? In the previous chapter, Jesus explained to John, saying, *"... the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches"* (Revelation 1:20).

I believe that the Lord still assigns an angel to each congregation as He did to the seven churches in Asia back then. Jesus our Lord and Savior also holds all angels in His hand and controls them all. Angels obey and report to Jesus. As Jesus walked among the seven churches back then, He still does today. He knows what's going on in each congregation. He is aware of everything churches do. He examines and holds them accountable. He praises their good deeds and asks them to repent of their sins. He opens up and closes the church as well.

v. 2-3: *<sup>2</sup>'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; <sup>3</sup>and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.*

Jesus knows everything happening in the Church. He knows our deeds. He doesn't stay aloof during the time of struggles and challenges for our congregation. He knows what's going on in our lives.

Note here that Christ commends the Church in Ephesus for their toil and perseverance, and for their courageous fight with heretical teachings such as Gnosticism. Consider the teachings of Cerinthus, for instance.

We need to know first who Cerinthus was.

**Cerinthus** (c. 50-100 A.D.) was *"an early Gnostic, who was prominent as a heresiarch in the view of the early Church Fathers. Contrary to the Church Fathers, he... **denied that the Supreme God made the physical world. ... He maintained that Jesus was not born of a virgin, but was a mere man, the biological son of Mary and Joseph.**"* Cerinthus was *"a contemporary to and opponent of John the Apostle. ... the Apostle John wrote his gospel specifically to refute the teachings of Cerinthus."*<sup>6</sup>

Now, the Bible backs up what I just read to you. Listen to John the Apostle who wrote the following in 1 John 4:1-3: *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that **Jesus Christ has come in the***

**flesh is from God;** <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming, and now it is already in the world."

John was very adamant on Christ's incarnation that he also wrote in 2 John 7-11:  
<sup>7</sup> For many deceivers have gone out into the world, **those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.** This is the deceiver and the antichrist. ... <sup>10</sup> **If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting;** <sup>11</sup> **for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds."**

Even though the same Apostle wrote that "The one who does not **love** does not know **God**, for **God is love**" (1 John 4:8), that love doesn't apply to the enemy of truth such as Cerinthus. There is a story about that. One day both John the Apostle and Cerinthus happened to be in the same bathhouse in Ephesus. As soon as he perceived Cerinthus within, he "... rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within." <sup>7</sup>

The lesson? The Church of God must resist and fight the heretical teachings in the Church today. (I will talk about one contemporary example later when we talk about the Church in Pergamum). The Lord commands us to defend the biblical truth. He wants us to test every teaching in the Church against the Scripture. He also praises those who practice such spiritual vigilance against heretical teachings. Don't forget. It is your Christian duty to examine whatever you hear in the Church including my message. Let's go to verse 4. Jesus says,

v. 4-5: <sup>4</sup> **But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.** <sup>5</sup> **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.**

Christ has found one thing against the Church in Ephesus. The loss of their first love. By the way, five churches out of seven in Asia Minor got a warning message or two. Only two didn't get anything against them (Smyrna and Philadelphia—we are going to talk about them later). Same with most of the churches in America. We all have something to repent of. Christ will surely let us know as long as we are willing to repent. We don't need to actively look for everything and anything wrong with our congregation, but it is always a good idea to stay alert on Christ's warning.

Back to the text. What was their first love? To whom does this 'first love' refer? Is it their first love for LORD God or their first love for each other? The text is unclear on this point. I believe either case can be true.

Either they lost their first love for the Lord. I remember how enthusiastic I was for the Lord when I first believed. I was all in. I was on fire for the Lord. Christ was everything to me. Although now I long for such first love to come back, that doesn't happen easily.

Or the Church in Ephesus might have lost their practice of love and grace for each other as they fiercely engaged in defending the biblical truth.

Now, whichever way you interpret their first love here, the point Jesus is making is clear: repent and return to your first love. He uses the word, 'repent.' Once again, don't take this word negatively. It is a good word. It is a healthy practice. Every believer, pastors and laity alike, saints and sinners alike, ought to embrace and practice repentance on a regular basis for lifetime. Let us remember: when the Lord asks us to repent, He always means our good. He wants us to start again from where we have fallen. Repentance is good for us. It never keeps us down or hurts us. On the contrary, it restores us back to the Lord and to fellow humans.

v. 5. **or else** *I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.* --Pay attention to Jesus' saying, '**or else.**' In other words, unless the Church repents and restores their first love, there will be a consequence. He will remove the lampstand out of its place, that is, no more church in Ephesus. May I say that the LORD doesn't mind closing the church door unless it fulfills the will of heavenly Father?

Let's ponder how many churches in America are closing their doors nowadays (One survey says, out of 34 Protestant denominations, 4,500 closed, 3,000 new congregations in 2019<sup>8</sup>). In Greater New Jersey Annual Conference, every year, 5 churches are permanently closed. You may want to say, well, it looks like each church has its own life cycle. Like any other living thing, after 200 years or so, it naturally dies. But can it be more than that? I am not saying that all church closings are the result of un-repentance. What I am saying is that even though a church is thriving, the Lord can have one or two things against it, and if it does not repent thereof, the Lord would move the lampstand to someplace else. I wonder if that's what had happened to so many churches in Europe in the past century. May it never happen to us!

v. 6:<sup>6</sup> *Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of **the Nicolaitans**, which I also hate.*

Christ is going back to praise. *You hate what I hate*, Jesus says. *You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, and so do I*, He declares. Who were the Nicolaitans? They were *the followers of Nicolaus, one of the seven deacons in the Early Church.*<sup>9</sup> What were their deeds that Christ hated? The practice of polygamy in the Church and eating the foods that were offered to idols, that affected three churches out of the seven in Asia Minor--Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira (Revelation 2:6, 14-15, 20). I will speak more about it later.

v. 7:<sup>7</sup> **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.*' --Christ here gives the Ephesian Church a choice. He never forces anyone against their own will. He concludes the letter with a promise to those who overcome: the privilege to eat of the tree of life in the Paradise.

## Conclusion

The lesson I got from the letter to the Ephesian Church is this: the church of the living God is **the pillar and support of the truth** (1 Timothy 3:15). When members vigorously engage themselves to defend the biblical truth, it pleases to the Lord. At the same time, we should restore our first love to the Lord and practice love and grace to each other. Let those who have ears, let them hear. Amen.

## End Notes

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ephesus>.
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_burning\\_at\\_Ephesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_burning_at_Ephesus)
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_the\\_Apostle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Apostle).
4. Ibid.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patmos>
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cerinthus>.
7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_the\\_Apostle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Apostle).
8. <https://religionnews.com/2021/05/26/study-more-churches-closing-than-opening/>.
9. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolaiism>.