

To the Seven Churches in Asia

The Ephesus Letter

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

1. We live in a society where it is not unheard of for a marriage to last for weeks before it is terminated in divorce. The opposite end of the spectrum is perhaps an even greater puzzle – lengthy marriages depicting great success and happiness, full of kids, and memories that end suddenly, and without any seeming warning.
 2. These marriages often tell the same story – everything was picturesque, working well, and even down to an exact routine without hiccups, but the substance that made it all mean something deep and wonderful was gone – the love behind it all was abandoned.
 3. **Ephesians 5:30-32** – **“This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”**
 4. The vision John saw of the **“Son of Man”** in all His glory prepares us to read the letters to the seven churches with sobriety, and self-examination.
 5. The first letter was to the church in Ephesus, and though they were for all intents and purposes a strong church, something fundamental was missing – **“you have left your first love” (2:4).**
- I. Christ’s Portrait
 - A. He Who Holds the Seven Stars in His Right Hand
 - a. **(1:20)** – the mystery explained, **“the angels of the seven churches.”**
 - i. Angel – *aggelos* – a messenger.
 - ii. **“messengers of the seven assemblies” (YLT).**
 - iii. **2:1a** – to the angel... **2:7** – to the churches.
 - b. **Stars (messengers of the churches) = CHARACTER – the message of the church’s true state of being – the church as it actually is, not as it is portrayed to be.**
 - i. Lampstand = FUNCTION – what the church is meant to be.
 - ii. **“in His right hand”** – power and control to determine the destiny of each – this is what He is doing in the letters; His will is for their character to match their function, and to be in fellowship with Him continually.
 - B. He Who Walks in the Midst of the Seven Golden Lampstands
 - a. **The lampstands are the possession of the “Son of Man” for the shining of His light in the world of darkness – this is the FUNCTION of the church.**
 - b. He is in their midst – **1:13**

- c. **He walks in their midst** – presence, fellowship (in danger – **v. 5**), intimate knowledge (their function and character), oversight and testing vision.
 - i. Walks – verb, present, active
 - ii. He is the creator/designer of the lampstands and their function, and the reason for each local church’s existence – they have purpose and use, but His constant overseeing presence is necessary – local church autonomy but not separate from the King’s rule.
- II. Christ’s Praise
- 1. Their Works
 - a. **“I know your works”** – beginning each letter – good or bad.
 - i. Here, it seems to be positive.
 - b. I.e. in general, their activity – they were an active church, rather than stagnant and sedentary.
 - c. Each local church exists with purpose, and utility in that purpose – **Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:10** – Christ’s body and fullness to carry out His work on earth.
 - 2. Their Labor
 - a. Labor is an intensified form of work – “(1) as exhausting physical or mental exertion toil, labor, work (JN 4.38); (2) as exhausting and wearisome difficulties encountered trouble, burden, hardship” (ALGNT)
 - b. Their work was such that cost them something, even of their own well-being.
 - i. **2 Corinthians 8:5** – giving of self to the Lord.
 - ii. **2 Samuel 24:24** (David when buying the threshing floor from Araunah to offer sacrifice for his sin) – their work was not the sort which cost them nothing.
 - 3. Their Patience
 - a. Constancy (endurance, abiding under) in that work despite the difficult cost.
 - b. If the work is good, it is worth the cost of pain. If such is true at the beginning, it is true continually.
 - c. **1 Peter 5:8-9** – they had been enduring the devil’s attempts and were steadfast.
 - 4. Their Purity
 - a. **2:2** – **“you cannot bear those who are evil”; “you cannot tolerate evil men” (NASB)**

- b. Ephesus was a chief commercial city of Ionia, and therefore the seat of much corruption and immorality.
 - c. Much like Corinth – **1 Corinthians 5:1-2, 9** – but Ephesus was not tolerating immorality.
 - d. **2:6** – they were opposed to the deeds of the Nicolaitans (More on them in the Pergamos letter – **2:15**).
5. Their Doctrinal Integrity
- a. **2:2** – tested those making false claims of apostleship.
 - b. They were not naïve, but diligent in discernment – **1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 John 4:1-6**
 - c. They were **“able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Titus 1:9)** and did so faithfully.
6. Their Perseverance
- a. **2:3** – They continued their activity and had not grown to think they had “done enough.”
 - b. Truly, they had here the Spirit of Christ – **John 5:34; 9:4-5**
7. Their Vigor
- a. **“and have not become weary” (2:3) – “But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary in doing good.” (2 Thessalonians 3:13)**
 - b. Despite the lapse of time spent in their existence as a church hard at strenuous work, they still had the strength and presence of mind to keep working.
- III. Christ’s Protest
- A. The list of Christ’s praise is impressive, and it is such that any mortal observing the activity Christ regarded in the first part of the letter would not find any fault to protest.
 - a. Christ has penetrating vision – **1:14** – He sees clearly what we may miss.
 - b. Ephesus is a church which should strike any other church with a sobering blow – if they were lacking, how likely is it that we could be too?
 - B. **“Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” (v. 4)**
 - C. Their First Love
 - a. **“First”** – this modifier speaks volumes to the standard of Christ, His great expectations, and greatest desires from us.
 - i. **“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.” (1 John 5:3)**
 - ii. The list of praise is evidence of the presence of love.
 - iii. Jesus, though, wants the **“first love.”**
 - b. The church of Ephesus at the **“first”**:

- i. Withdrawal from their countrymen – **Acts 19:8-9**
 - ii. Burning their expensive books of magic – **Acts 19:18-20**
 - iii. Tender affection shown in the departure of Paul – **Acts 20:36-38**
 - iv. The sounding forth of their love for each other – **Ephesians 1:15**
 - v. Common denominator – **“For the love of Christ compels us” (2 Corinthians 5:14).**
 1. Leaving fellow Jews (family), destroying pricy items, loving strangers deeply.
 2. These all defy common sense and behavior – **cf. Luke 7:37-39, 44-47** – **“she loved much”**
 3. These are the products of the compelling force of **“first love”** – **1 John 4:10, 19**
- c. It is the marital love of the beginning – **2 Corinthians 11:2-3**
- i. **“simplicity and purity of devotion” (NASB)** – simplicity – *haplotēs* – singleness, sincerity, not self-seeking, open heartedness.
 1. The comparison of Eve shows the point – something captured her attention more than her God.
 2. Simplicity and purity – fully captivating, with no room for other.
 - ii. **Proverbs 5:18-20** – the wife of youth, enraptured with her love.
 - iii. Not forgetting the wife of youth and being tantalized by another – **Malachi 2:11, 14**
 1. This is the danger of the Ephesians – all that they were praised for is in danger of becoming an empty shell of itself, and not long after that it will cease altogether as they leave the Lord for another.
- D. Evidence of Their Departure
- a. The trio acknowledged by Christ at the beginning of the letter is evidently commendable **(v. 2)**, but finds great contrast with a letter to a different church, a church still at the **“first”** – **1 Thessalonians 1:2-4**
 - i. **Work of faith** – Christ only mentioned work
 - ii. **Labor of love** – Christ only mentioned labor
 - iii. **Patience of hope** – Christ only mentioned patience
 - iv. These three modifiers have an object toward which they are aimed – the Person of Christ.
 1. **Faith in Christ** – work coming from faithful devotion to the One who has merited your everything – **Galatians 2:20**

2. **Love for Christ** – intense labor of self-giving coming from reciprocated love for the One who gave Himself in love – **2 Corinthians 5:14-15**
 3. **Hope toward Christ** – endurance/perseverance coming from a confident expectation of seeing the Lord of glory return with the reward of final transformation, as He faithfully promised – **1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 5:9-10**
 - v. **The faith, love, and hope are the substance of the work, labor, and patience:**
 1. Work without faith is rote procedure, form without substance.
 2. Labor without love is just a grueling task of vanity.
 3. Patience without hope is simply endless, empty pain.
 4. Work, labor, and patience may continue for a time without faith, love, and hope, but are destined to crumble, and result in ultimate apostasy.
 - b. What about the other things commended by Christ? He praises them to be sure, but were they all they could be if they hadn't left their first love?
 - i. ***"And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."*** (**1 Corinthians 13:2**)
 - E. "He who woos the bride can never have his heart satisfied with a servant."
(Morgan, G. Campbell. The Works of G. Campbell Morgan)
 - a. God has always had a distaste for empty, and shallow form.
 - b. His treasure/portion/inheritance is His people, not their procedure – ***"For the LORD's portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance."*** (**Deuteronomy 32:9**)
- IV. Christ's Prescription
- A. Christ made His protest and now provides the prescription to set things right – **Revelation 2:5** – Remember, repent, and repeat.
 - B. Remember
 - a. Remembrance is key to faithful love for Christ – **2 Peter 1:9, 12-15** – forgetfulness leads to complacency, idleness, and emptiness, and remembrance prevents these.
 - b. **Hebrews 6:4-5; 10:32** – recall the former days – days when you were first enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, partaken of the Holy Spirit, tasted the word of God and its powers.

- c. Remember how gracious the Lord tasted at first (**cf. 1 Peter 2:3**), and how it drove you!
- C. Repent
 - a. The remembrance of the intensity of our first love, zeal, and devotion is likely to cut to our heart, and beckon us to change our mind to resemble that of the first.
 - b. **To remember without repenting is to harden – the soul that recalls the overwhelming love in response to the greatest love received only to continue down the same path away from it is causing irreparable damage.**
 - c. His goodness is meant to lead you to change/repentance – **Romans 2:4**
 - i. Do not mistake His presence for satisfaction – **“He...who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.” (v. 1)**
 - ii. Do not mistake the candlestick in His midst as an unconditional permanent dwelling – **“or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent.” (v. 5)**
- D. Repeat
 - a. The change of mind that is repentance is always followed with a return if it is true – **“Therefore repent and return” (Acts 3:19, NASB).**
 - b. **“you have left your first love” – “repent and do the first works”**
 - i. He said, **“I know your works”** – they were active, but these works are not the first works.
 - ii. The first works are the works of first love – they are not only work, labor, and patience, but work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope.
 - iii. Do all that you have been doing, but DO MORE, DO BETTER!
- E. The lampstand in Ephesus burned, but the light it projected wasn’t strong enough to fulfill its intended purpose. The true message of the church’s character showed it was lacking in the greatest ingredient, love.
 - a. If they sought to truly shine the light of Christ, the light of love, they had to return to their **“first love”** which they had abandoned.

Conclusion

1. Christ concludes His letter to Ephesus with a promise – **(v. 7)** – if they hear, and they repent and overcome, they will not only have presence of His lifegiving fellowship among the lampstands as they shine their light on earth, but they will be given access to the very presence of God, and will partake of the tree of life that basks in the Sun of God’s glory – **Revelation 22:1-5**
2. With all the duty we are devoted to carrying out, we must never leave our **“first love.”**