

Letter to Ephesus
Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

The Lord Jesus, the Head of the Church, inspects the seven churches in the Roman Province of Asia (modern Turkey). In chapters 2-3, He delivers His verdict. Smyrna receives unmixing praise. Laodicea receives unrelieved condemnation. Philadelphia gets more praise than blame; Sardis, more blame than praise. Ephesus, Perganum and Thyatira received praise and blame evenly balanced.

There are characteristics of these churches throughout the ages. They still exist today. Every church falls into one of these categories. The risen Lord evaluates every church because He knows the state with perfect accuracy. We quote **For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them** (Matthew 18:20) for our comfort – but it is also for our discomfort!

John was on Patmos as a prisoner. It was a straight sail of 60 miles to Ephesus. It was not only the nearest of the seven churches to Patmos, but it was the most important. Ephesus was a great seaport and commercial centre. Roads led to Ephesus, it was the capital of the province and it was self-governing. It was the assize town for the administration of justice. The Pan Ionian Games (like the ancient Olympic Games) were held there. It was a very religious city. The Temple of Diana was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Emperor worship was practiced, and there were many gods.

Gospel witness in Ephesus began when Paul visited the city on his second and third missionary journeys. He stayed over two and a half years there, and established a church there. It was a key place for Gospel witness since there were many visitors to the city and it had a strong influence over the surrounding countryside.

When Paul left, he put Timothy in charge of the church to supervise the work and guard the truth of the Gospel. From Paul's first imprisonment in Rome he wrote his letter to the Ephesians, and later his two letters to Timothy. Thirty-five years had passed since then. How was the church doing after this time? Revelation 2 tells us.

The letter begins with commendation

After 35 years, Christ finds a great deal that is good about the church at Ephesus. He commends it on three points.

It was a hard working church. **I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance** (Revelation 2:2). There was plenty of activity at Ephesus; they were fully occupied and there was no shortage of volunteers when there were jobs to be done. Besides being diligent, conscientious and hard working, they were also patient and enduring.

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name (Revelation 2:3). The pagan religions were very strong in Ephesus and there were riots and hatred against the Christians. They would have been snubbed, shopkeepers would have refused to sell to them, family members would have given them the cold shoulder, their houses would have been attacked, and they would have been personally assaulted in the streets. Despite all this, they showed unswerving loyalty to the Lord, and courage and bravery.

Thirdly, they were very sound and orthodox. **You have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false** (Revelation 2:2). The Ephesus church had learned to examine the teaching of every man and compare it against the truth of the Gospel, and rejected any that was false. Even in the second century, the Ephesian church was commended by Bishop Ignatius for their reputation for their faithfulness to the truth. How sad that many churches today are shy of taking such a firm stand, for fear of being dubbed intolerant or bigoted.

It would appear from this that the church at Ephesus was a splendid church, indeed a model church, in all their busyness, endurance and sound doctrine. And yet:

The letter continues with a complaint

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love (Revelation 2:4). Despite having all these things going for them, they had fallen from the early heights of devotion to Christ to the plains of mediocrity. They had backslidden. Outwardly, all was well, but inwardly things were badly wrong. Just like Israel in the Old Testament had been unfaithful to the Lord, flirting with other laws and gods, so here in the New Testament members of the Bride of Christ had fallen out of love with Him.

Their love for Christ had been there at the start. **Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love** (Ephesians 6:24). But 35 years later there was an inward change. Perhaps a new generation lacked the enthusiasm of their parents and the founders of the church. Unless something happened soon, even the virtues would be corrupted. Without love, their hard work would become drudgery, their endurance would lead to bitterness, and orthodoxy would become mere correctness and coldness. The Christian life is not just service or soundness, but a love relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, leading to love for His people.

What about our own situation? Can we look back on better days spiritually? At first we could not love Him enough. Our love was pure, warm and enthusiastic. We would have done anything for Him. We would have given our life for Him. His Word was the most precious thing to us. We could not go to too many meetings. We prayed about everything. But what about now? Externally, everything is all right. We are here in church after all! But what about the heart? Is it all right? Has the heart gone from our commitment, and are we acting out of habit now?

“The novelty has worn off”, we say. But there is no reason for our love to wear off. The novelty can wear off in marriage, but hopefully the love continues and grows to the very end. And yet in our Christian lives, we have to admit that there are no longer

the evidences of love – deep gratitude, deep trust, thinking about Him, longing to please Him and commend Him, a passion for Christ.

Perhaps it has happened slowly and imperceptibly, and we have not realized what has been happening. But now we wake up to reality of it. Where did it all go wrong? Maybe it is because business has prospered and money has stolen our heart. Or maybe we have made friends with the wrong people. Maybe ambition at work has taken first place in our lives. Time with God has been clipped back to a minimum – or even less. But still we keep up the appearances – we do our bit in the church so we are seen to work for him, we still endure and we say and believe all the right things. But it is all on the outside.

Behind it all, something has taken the place of God in our heart and life. Our priorities are all jumbled about and out of place. Something quite innocent and legitimate may have taken over our life. God is now in 2nd place, or is it 22nd place? Beware, for like Peter you may yet openly deny your Lord.

The heart and centre of the Christian life is heart commitment to Christ - not hard work, endurance or sound doctrine. A heart aflame with love for Christ, else everything else is an empty performance. There is no substitute for a heart that is right with God. D.M.Lloyd Jones was a champion of orthodoxy who urged many ministers and churches never to compromise about the great Gospel truths. “Be separate from all compromising alliances”, he wrote, preached and counselled to the end. Yet in his book “The Fight of Faith” he wrote, “Fellowship with God is more than orthodoxy. Love to God – a love that wholly possesses us is our supreme need. Before all else, our chief desire should be that I may know Him. To know Him properly leads to a life full of peace.” If the church is not a loving church, it is not a living church.

The letter concludes with a command

Remember, repent and repeat! **Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first** (Revelation 2:5).

(1) Remember! Keep thinking of where you used to be, and think of where you are now. Notice the gap between then and now. Compare how your attitudes have changed towards God’s Word, fellowship with God’s people, recall how you once were moved at the Lord’s Table and during your meetings with the Lord in private.

(2) Repent! Recognise this, admit this, lament this, and then do something about it. Confess it, and turn in a new direction. Get things sorted out with the Lord before you go to sleep tonight. Make a sharp break with your life now; turn your back on your self and sin in the life. Do this at once; don’t wait for an emotional appeal or dynamic sermon. Ask the Lord to cleanse and put new strength in your life.

(3) Repeat! Get back to where you used to be with God. Rearrange your priorities, and make sure He is number one again. Value everything now by how it affects your relationship with Him. Ask for new singleness of mind. Aim to know Him. Get back to your first love. Renew your devotion to Him. The result will be new vigour, new motive, new perseverance, new centre and new singleness.

These are important matters. And God reminds the church at Ephesus of the dangers of disobedience. The church's existence would be ignominiously terminated. The lampstand would be removed from its place. No church has a permanent place in this world. Ephesus didn't. There is no church there today, only ruins. A church ceasing to shine for Christ loses any reason for existence. It may still have a minister, a choir, a congregation, activities, at least for a while. But where the lampstand is removed, there is darkness – no light because there is no love for Christ. The end is just a matter of time.

Consider the usage of old church buildings in many places. Some are now houses, warehouses, garages, nightclubs, and mosques. The reason is sometimes that the population has moved, and new buildings have been built where the people have relocated. But in other cases, there simply ceased to be any spiritual life, and the lampstand was removed. The Lord had long since departed. Power and grace had gone, and the end finally came, the doors closed for the last time.

But there is a promise to the penitent. **To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God** (Revelation 2:7). This is a reference to bliss in the world to come, enjoyment to the full of fellowship with God, perfect communion with God in heaven. Our joy will one day be complete.

Conclusion

A look at other Scripture to finish with gives us another resounding reason why we should recover our first love. Think again of His love for us. Think that He bore our sins, curse, shame, penalty, died in our place, changed our eternal destiny from hell to heaven. **We love Him because He first loved us** (1 John 4:19).

A text that hung over the mantelpiece in huge letters played a part in John Newton's conversion. It read, "Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee." (Deuteronomy 15:15). How can we look at Calvary without amazement at our hard hearts? Does this not fill you with love for Christ? How can you think of these things without feeling broken down? When you look at these things, do you not feel that you owe Him everything, and your whole life needs to be given to express your gratitude and praise?

In Ephesus and in every church there is work to be done, suffering to be endured, and the truth of the Gospel to be championed. But above all, there is Someone to be loved with the love we had for Him at the beginning. Remember that He loved us first.