

Series Revelation

This Message #3 Revelation 2:1-7

Last week we learned about the circumstances of John. He had been exiled on the small island of Patmos because, as a prominent Christian leader, he was considered to be a threat to the pagan religious practices of the Roman authorities.

While on Patmos, John was given an awesome vision of the glorified person of Jesus Christ. When John saw Jesus, he fell on his face as though dead. Jesus raised him up, told him to not be afraid, and gave him instructions about what to do: John was to write everything he saw and heard on a scroll and send it to seven of the churches in the region of Asia Minor.

The vision of Jesus in chapter 1 was the first of many scenes in this book in which Jesus will be the central figure. This entire book concerns the Revelation of Jesus Christ, specifically His activity at the end of the age. Each section of the book will reveal Jesus Christ in some significant way as He brings the program of God the Father to its conclusion.

Let me put this book in Biblical perspective. Most of the information we have about Jesus concerns His first advent. We know about the Old Testament prophecies and about the New Testament descriptions of His birth, His teachings, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. We understand why and how Jesus atoned for human sin and made individual relationships with God possible. We know that the powers of evil and death were defeated by Jesus on the cross. We know that Jesus is now at the Father's right hand waiting for the Father's permission to bring to completion the program which began with the disobedience of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 3.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ is a prophecy describing to us what will happen in the last stages of the Father's program. The theme of the book is **The Victory of Christ and His Church Over Satan and the World**. The decisive victory over evil and death was won at the cross. However, even though the final outcome of the battle is no longer in doubt, spiritual "mop-up" operations are still in effect. The Revelation of Jesus Christ is God's explanation to us of how evil will ultimately be eradicated and God will once again be able to dwell with his people in new heavens and a new earth.

John was instructed to record the visions he was going to see. He was going to see current circumstances in the church fellowships which existed at the end of the 1st Century. He was also going to see events associated with the second coming of Jesus at the end of this age, and he was going to see descriptions of spiritual conditions during all the years in between.

With that background, let's read what Jesus said to the church fellowship in the city of Ephesus.

Read Revelation 2:1-7

Ephesus was one of the four most important cities in the Roman empire. It was the capital of the province of Asia, the main seaport and commercial center at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. At the end of the 1st Century, there were 250,000 residents in the city. The most outstanding feature of the city was the temple of Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility. *[The Romans named this goddess Diana.]* The Temple of Artemis was the largest man-made structure in the world at that time, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The worship of Artemis involved gross pagan practices, including male and female temple prostitution. The citizens of Ephesus were given over to a self-indulgent lifestyle.

The Apostle Paul evangelized in Ephesus during his 3rd missionary journey. He had about three years of very effective ministry in the city (*Acts 20:31; but see also Acts 19:10*). In fact, Paul made Ephesus the center of evangelism for all of Asia Minor. There is a verse in the book of Acts stating that "all the Jews and Gentiles who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (*Acts 19:10*).

When Paul moved on to another location, he "urged Timothy to stay in Ephesus to command certain men not to teach false doctrines, ... not to devote themselves to myths and genealogies ... which promoted controversies" (*1 Timothy 1:3-4*).

The Apostle John also ministered there both before and after his time of exile.

Jesus had some important things to say to the Church of Ephesus, and He began by calling attention to one of the aspects of His majesty and glory previously mentioned in chapter 1. He wanted His recipients to know that He had a firm grip on the seven stars, which represented the angel messengers of the churches (*Revelation 1:20*), and that He walked among the seven golden lampstands, the churches. *[The symbolism of the lampstands to represent the churches is in keeping with other passages of Scripture: the church fellowships were to shed light in a dark world.]*

Jesus was intimately acquainted with the thoughts and actions of the members of the Ephesian church. He knew all about their “deeds,” their “hard work,” and their “perseverance.” The extent of their activities is emphasized again in verse 3, “You have persevered and endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”

It was undoubtedly difficult to live a God-pleasing life in the midst of the pagan culture of Ephesus. However, Jesus did not commend them for their general faithfulness. He commended them with these words: “I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, and that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not.”

It was not the pagans of Ephesus who caused the hardships faced by the church members but their on-going conflict with “false apostles.” In the last decades of the 1st Century there were many itinerant preachers and teachers circulating among the established churches. They claimed to speak for God. They sought to have positions of influence higher than the local elders of the churches. They even claimed to be apostles. These pseudo-apostles were seldom interested in difficult pioneer evangelism. Rather they sought to “cash in” on the successes and reputations built up by congregations in cities like Ephesus.

The Apostle Paul did not have any positive things to say about such individuals. In his letter to the believers in Corinth he said that he wanted to “cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us.” He wrote that “such men were false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder,” he said, “for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light,” and “it is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness” (*II Corinthians 11:4-5, 12-15*).

The Apostle John was also acquainted with the problems caused by false teachers. He wrote these instructions to his readers: "Dear friends, 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." He said that these false prophets possessed "the spirit of the antichrist," and that they were from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world" (*I John 4:1, 3, 5*).

Timothy was urged to minister in Ephesus "so that he might command certain men not to teach false doctrines." As Paul wrote to Timothy, "some (of those in Ephesus) have wandered away from love which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith, and, although they want to be teachers, ... they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm" (*I Timothy 1:3-7 excerpts*).

[Before His crucifixion, Jesus had predicted that "many false prophets will appear and deceive many people" (Matthew 24:11). There are more warnings and instructions in II Peter 2:1-3 and Acts 20:29-31]

The believers in Ephesus had successfully resisted the influences of the false teachers for many years. They had "tested the claims" of these false teachers and determined that they were not telling the truth. The believers had remembered and followed the instructions of Paul, Timothy, and John. They had endured hardships for the name of Jesus because of the false apostles. And for this the church in Ephesus was justifiably commended by Jesus.

However, verse 4 indicates that all was not completely well in the church in Ephesus. In fact, there was a defect so serious that, if it remained uncorrected, it would result in the removal of the fellowship from its place. The believers displeased Jesus because they had "forsaken" and "abandoned" the quality of love they had at the beginning of their faith relationship with Jesus.

The spiritual attitudes of the congregation had changed over the years. The church had been established about 40 years previously, so most of the people who would read John's letter would be second generation believers. They still were faithful to Jesus but the quality and intensity of their love was unlike it had been at the beginning.

It isn't difficult to understand what had happened. It is observable in some evangelical church fellowship today. The church members had settled into a kind of cold orthodoxy. Their doctrine was sound. They put lots of energy into the struggle with heretical teachings. The problem was that too much attention had been given to those opposed to truth and insufficient attention was being given to the supreme godly virtue of love. Loving devotion for Jesus and loving concerns for fellow believers had been lost in the midst of busy service, and the people did not realize that their pursuit of doctrinal purity was not a substitute for love. Service for God can become "mechanical" — a humdrum doing of things one is expected to do, and which can be done without love. As one commentator described it, "the Ephesians had a theology as clear as ice and just as cold."

Jesus did not define the kind of love which was missing, but the Bible makes it clear that He was referring to love for God and love for humans. These two areas are closely linked together. When, on one occasion, Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the most important, He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" and then He quickly added, "The second is this, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Jesus said, "There is no commandment greater than these" (*Mark 12:29-31*).

The Apostle Paul described the relationship of service to love with these familiar words, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (*1 Corinthians 13:1-3*).

As believers our priority must ever be relationship over service. As believers, we must never substitute good works for worship and devotion. Our ministry efforts must be grounded in and spring out of our love and appreciation for Jesus. The members of the Ephesian church had lost their focus. They had taken their eyes off of Jesus and were focused on works done in His name. Their love was cold and had been replaced with a harsh zeal for orthodoxy. It was good that they were honoring the name of Jesus by their confession, but they also needed to manifest His life by their loving attitudes to Him and to those around them.

The remedy for their condition required three steps. First of all, they were to “remember.” They were to bring back to mind what had been lost. Second, they were to “repent.” Reflection on their past experiences of “first love” would, hopefully, convict them of their present spiritual condition and to cause them to want to change their ways. The word “repent” means “change of heart,” and that change must be sincere and strong enough to cause the individual to repudiate what is unacceptable and to want to embrace better behavior. The third step was a “return” to the preferred behavior of the past — behavior which was characterized and motivated by “love.”

Jesus warned that failure to take these necessary steps would cause Him to “remove their lampstand from its place.” A church without love would not be a true representation of Christ’s body, and therefore Jesus has the right to remove the lampstand of any congregation which is not properly reflecting His character.

In verse 6, Jesus complimented the Ephesian believers for the way they handled a particularly bad group of evil influencers, the Nicolaitans. We don’t know very much about this group; only that they permitted certain fleshly behaviors which believers considered to be inappropriate, and also advocated that believers accommodate certain Roman civil religious practices, such as emperor worship. The believers in Ephesus took a firm stand against these heretical ideas, and refused to blend their Christian faith with the Nicolaitan group, and Jesus was pleased about that. Jesus acknowledged that the believers hated what He hated.

Each of the letters to the churches closes with the words, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The statement is an appeal for individual believers to make the necessary changes in their behavior. It was Jesus who was speaking, but it was the Spirit who communicated the meaning and applied the words.

Also, each of the letters ends with the promise of a reward for those believers who are “overcomers.” Each promise is related to some great reality which is described in the last two chapters of the book. For example, in verse 7, Jesus promised to give to the one “who overcomes the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” “The tree of life” is mentioned three times in the last chapter of Revelation (*chapter 22, verses 2, 14, and 19*).

Furthermore, the promises have obvious connections with Genesis chapters 2 and 3. They relate to benefits that were lost in the disobedience of Adam and Eve but are restored in Jesus Christ. The expression, “I will give,” identifies Jesus as the donor of the rewards.

The big question in verse 7 concerns the identity of the “overcomers.” In the context of Jesus’ words to the church in Ephesus, it is those believers who, first, persevere in their faith in spite of hardships, and, second, who resist the influences of evildoers, especially those who do not teach truth, and, third, who recognize that they must renew their loyalty and devotion to Jesus. They are the ones who will receive the special spiritual benefit to be provided by Jesus — access to the “tree of life.”

The “tree of life” is first mentioned in Genesis chapter 2 as one of the trees given to Adam and Eve for food while they lived on earth in fellowship with God. Access to the tree was denied to them after their fall into sin (*Genesis 3:22, 24*). There is a sense in which access to the “tree of life” will be the privilege of every believer in eternity, but the special promise to “overcomers” in verse 7 must be some kind of unique experience and blessing provided to them for life in this age. Overcomers are those who have a spiritual relationship with God. The details are not explained to us, but it must have something to do with the spiritual life and vitality which is provided to us through the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul explained it in these words which he wrote to the Ephesians, “I keep asking that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened in order that you may know 1) the hope to which he has called you, 2) the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and 3) his incomparably great power for us who believe” (*Ephesians 1:17-19*).