

The Seven Churches of Revelation

Lesson 1
Rev. 2:1-7

The original recipients of the book of Revelation were seven churches located in the Roman province of Asia. These churches were Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

There were more than seven churches located in Asia Minor in the first century, but seven as a symbolic number of completeness or totality meaning these churches are representative of all churches, in all places, throughout all the ages. These churches experienced the same temptations and failures that we see in churches today and thus stand as stark reminders and warnings to the Lord's church in the 21st century. In this study we will look at the individual instruction given to each church in Revelation 2-3.

The Church at Ephesus *"Abandoned the Love They Had at First"*

Ephesus was the capital and most important city in the province of Asia (modern Turkey) in the first century. This wealthy pagan city of about 250,000 people was noted as the centre for the worship of Diana. The city was located about 100 kilometres from Patmos where the Apostle John recorded the Revelation.

Paul made three visits to the church in Ephesus, spending a short time there during his second missionary journey in A.D. 52 and returning during his third missionary journey to stay for three years.



In Revelation 2:1 the Lord Jesus dictates to the Apostle John what to write to the angel of the church in Ephesus. The imagery that is seen here is explained in Rev. 1:20. It is called a mystery which means the meaning is unknowable apart from divine revelation.

It is difficult to determine the identity of the "angel" in Rev. 2:1. Literally the word "angel" means "messenger" and while we typically think of angels as supernatural spiritual beings sent from God for specific missions, this is not the only meaning. The word *angelos* simply means messenger and is used of John the Baptist in Matt. 11:10.

It is possible that God has a specific angel to minister to each congregation, just as they seem to sometimes minister to individual people (Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14), but this is not taught in any other passage of Scripture. If Jesus spoke to a supernatural angel through a man (John) this would be the only instance in the Bible of such an occurrence making it highly unusual.

Some believe the angels are simply the messengers who received this letter from John to carry back to their respective congregations. Perhaps these churches had sent envoys to Patmos where John was exiled to minister to him and these messengers then carried back these words of Jesus to the churches.

Still others believe that angels refer to evangelists as the messengers of truth sent to establish churches or perhaps elders who are responsible for the spiritual instruction and well being of the congregation. Some point out that since a single angel is named for each congregation elders should be ruled out since elders (also called pastors or shepherds) always serve in plurality, however the word angel (singular) could symbolically stand for more than one individual.

It seems most likely these “angels” were human messengers used to bring this teaching to the church (i.e. preachers or evangelists). Since this language is symbolic we should not be dogmatic in our interpretation since their identity does not alter the message to the churches.

1. From reading Revelation 1:20, what is the meaning of the seven stars and seven lampstands?

2. Why is the church likened to a lampstand? (See Matt. 5:14-16)

Jesus holds the “seven stars in his right hand.” The word hold means to grip firmly. No one could take these angels away from him. Jesus walks among the seven lampstands showing his concern and watch-care over the churches.

Description Christ gives himself to the church at Ephesus

“him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” (Rev. 2:1)

The Lord watches over the church and nothing escapes his notice. He says to the Ephesians, **“I know your works.”** He knows completely and accurately everything done within the church and in the life of every Christian (Hebrews 4:12-13). The words Jesus gives John to write were exactly what the church needed to hear.

Commendation to the Church at Ephesus

Jesus commends the Ephesian church as being an **active** church. They worked, toiled, endured persecution. No one would look at this church and say they were idle or unconcerned.

The Ephesian church was **committed to truth**. They listened to those who called themselves apostles and could tell by their lifestyle and teachings that they were evil and false. They would not allow false doctrine to infiltrate the church.

3. What instruction and warning did the Apostle Paul give to the elders of the church at Ephesus in Acts 20:29-31?

The church in Ephesus had **endured hardship** for Christ. They endured patiently and had not grown weary. They continued to bear up under the onslaught of persecution and trial.

4. What does it mean to “not grow weary” and why is this an important trait of a faithful church?

Rebuke to the Church at Ephesus

The Lord now turns his attention to what is not right in the Ephesian church. Jesus says, “***you have abandoned the love you had at first.***” The word translated as “abandoned” can mean giving up, leaving, or rejection, but it can also mean simple neglect.



The Lord knows all and looks not only at the outward actions of a church, but he examines the heart as well. The Ephesian church was still active and appeared healthy and alive, but they were showing signs of neglect which demonstrated they no longer had the love for Jesus that they once did.

5. What could cause a church (or individual Christians) to love Christ less than they once did?

6. What does it mean to love the Lord and how is this demonstrated?

The Call to the Ephesian Church to Repent

All is not lost since Jesus has not only identified the weakness in the Ephesian church; he has outlined the cure. First, they must **remember** from where they had fallen. They needed to reflect on what Christ had done for them and the closeness of the relationship they once shared.

7. Why is the call to “remember” such a common command?

Second the church needed to **repent**. This is not just sorrow, but a determination to quit living for sin and self and to change direction to live wholly for Christ. It is a change of will which leads to a change in actions.

Third, the Ephesian Christians needed to change their **actions**. Previously we read the church was active, but somehow the actions or motivation for them had changed. There is a difference in being busy and being faithful in our work for Christ.

Another Commendation

Jesus now makes another favourable comment about the Ephesians. They hated the works of the Nicolaitans. We don't know with certainty the origins or the teachings of the Nicolaitans, but we do know they were ungodly. Christians are to hate evil (Rom 12:9).

Some early Church leaders claimed the founder of the Nicolaitans was Nicolas the seventh deacon in Acts 6, who fell away from the faith, but this is uncertain. Others believe the name comes from the Greek word *Nikolaus* which means "he who conquers or lords it over."¹ Ignatius writing about AD 107 described the Nicolaitans as lovers of pleasure, men who were devoid of the Holy Spirit, and corrupters of the flesh.²

While we cannot know with any certainty the exact teachings of the Nicolaitans we do know that Jesus hated what they did and the Ephesian church was commended for hating their works as well.

There is grave danger for any church that loses the love it had at first. Unless the church remembers, repents, and changes their actions the Lord will come and remove their lampstand from its place.

We already learned the lampstands symbolised the churches, therefore a loveless church will eventually die or cease to exist. If the church is not being the light of the world as it reflects the One who is the light and who made light, it will eventually be extinguished.



8. Why is the Lord willing to remove unfaithful churches?

It's Time to Hear

The church is made up of individual Christians and in Rev. 2:7 the call is to each Christian to listen to what has come to them by letter through the Holy Spirit. The call to hear is not just to audibly receive a message. To hear means to process information and to act in accordance to the instruction given. In this case it was to repent.

¹ Smith, James E. *Behold! The Revelation of Jesus*. Lulu, 2008, p. 47.

² Ibid.

If the church members will not listen then the church will be extinguished. To those who do listen and conquer the temptations that surround them, the Lord makes a great and wondrous promise. To each of the seven churches the Lord makes a promise. These promises are not exclusive to a single church, but to all churches in all places, for all time.

Promise #1 to the Churches

"To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

Mankind was banned from eating of the Tree of Life after it was removed from the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned. Now through obedience to Christ the right to eat of this tree will be restored. This is the first time we read of the Tree of Life since the book of Genesis.

Paradise literally means "a garden of delight." Much like the Garden of Eden where man walked with God and his senses were delighted with the beauty and peacefulness of the Garden, the man who conquers will live in paradise eternally. Paradise here refers to heaven where the Tree of Life is now located (Rev. 22:2).

Questions for the Upcoming Week

1. Consider the glory of living in the paradise of God and describe what this means to your life.
2. Are you excelling in all the areas in which the Ephesians were commended? In what if any areas do you need to improve?
3. Do you love the Lord as much as at first (or ever) in your life? If not, what do you need to change? If so, what will you do to keep your faith alive?
4. At what times in your life is it most difficult to listen to God?