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Jesus' Letters to Seven Asian Churches - Revelation 2:1-3:22
Part 1 of 7: Ephesus - Revelation 2:1-7

By Tal Davis

Introduction

After His death and resurrection Jesus' twelve apostles scattered throughout the world preaching the gospel as He had commanded. One of them was the Apostle John, the brother of James and the son of Zebedee. He was known as the "Beloved Disciple" because of his special relationship to Jesus. Five of John's writings are preserved in the New Testament, including the last book of the Bible, Revelation. It is also called the "Apocalypse," a derivative of the first word in the text which, in Greek, means "unveiling" or "reveal." It is written in a style typical of apocalyptic literature. That mode of writing includes symbolic language and descriptions of visions.

Tradition says that John was the only apostle not martyred for his faith. However, late in his life, around AD 95, the aged John lived on the Aegean Sea island of Patmos, just off the coast of the Anatolian peninsula, also called Asia Minor (now eastern Turkey). He was exiled because of his bold ministry for Christ, primarily in Ephesus (Rev. 1:9). He tells how, on one Lord's day, he was in the Spirit when he witnessed a vision of the risen and exalted Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:8-20). The Lord commanded John to write down what he was about to hear and see, and send it as letters to seven churches in seven cities of Asia. Those towns included Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev. 1:11). The churches in those cities were facing the prospect of increased harsh persecution. So, to each church, the Lord issued a specific message of commendation and/or warning re-

garding the quality of their life and work for His kingdom in preparation for what was coming.

"Stupid is as stupid does." Sound vaguely familiar? It is a famous movie quote. The implication being that what a person does says more about how much sense they have than how smart they think they are. Well, certainly churches are not stupid. But we might say, in the same vain, "Church is as Church does!" Okay, but we may need to inquire, "Just what does a church do and how do they know if they do it well?"

The object of this seven part series is to learn from Jesus Himself what He says makes for a healthy and strong church. As we will see, it is not what churches think about what they are doing that matters, it is what the risen and exalted Lord Himself knows about what they are doing, and why they do it. In Revelation, chapters two and three, the risen Lord issues verdicts on His awareness of the seven churches of Asia. In this series we analyze the histories and environments of those ancient cities and see how they impacted the churches and how the churches impacted them. We will also see a biblical worldview perspective on how the Lord's findings apply even to churches today.

Church #1 - Ephesus: Revelation 2:1-7

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: 2 'I know your deeds and your labor and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people, and you have put those who call themselves apostles to the test, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and

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have endured on account of My name, and have not become weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 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 I will remove your lampstand from its place - unless you repent. 6 But you have this, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who overcomes, I will grant to eat from the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.' (NASB)

The first church the Lord addresses was located in the great sea port of Ephesus. This was the logical place for the Lord to begin His series since it sat on the coast of the Aegean Sea. John had spent much of his life ministering there. The other six cities were in geographical proximity to Ephesus.

Ephesus was one of the largest and most impressive cities in the Roman Empire. It was located on the western shore of Asia Minor with a busy harbor. Thus, Ephesus was a strategic center of political, religious, and commercial life in that region. Its most imposing edifice was its temple to the Greek goddess Artemis (Roman Diana) built in 560 BC. Destroyed by fire in 356 BC, the city was rebuilt in 250 BC. By 133 BC, the Romans had taken complete control of the city's civic and military life. The city in John's time period had a population of about 250,000 people.

Ephesus also boasted an elaborate theater that seated 24,000 patrons. Years earlier, as recorded in the book of Acts, Paul's successful ministry in Ephesus had angered some of the silver smiths who made shrines to Artemis. A riot ensued

and two of Paul's associates, Gaius and Aristarchus, were dragged before a riotous mob in the theater. There, for two hours, a frenzied crowd shouted at the top of their voices, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Eventually, the city clerk calmed the mob and released the disciples. (Acts 19:23-41)

As with all the seven letters, the Lord begins in verse one with a greeting to the recipient who He calls the angel of the church. The Greek word translated angel means "messenger" and is used in various ways in Scripture. It usually refers to supernatural heavenly beings like the ones who announced the birth of Christ (Luke 1:26-38; 2:13-15), and appeared at Jesus' empty tomb (Matthew 28:2-7; Mark 16:5-7; Luke 24:4-7). Seen that way, some observers believe it could refer to angelic guardians of the churches. But that does not seem to fit this context, though such angels are prominent in later sections of Revelation.

Other interpreters identify the angels as merely representations of the churches themselves. That symbolic usage is not found anywhere else and does not really do justice to the way Jesus personally addresses the angel in each letter.

Granted those alternative perspectives, in the cases of the Asian churches, "angel of the church" most likely refers to their human pastors. Those men had been selected by God to lead and instruct each congregation. In the context of the seven letters, he was the one individual messenger (angel) designated to deliver the Lord's dispatch to each assembled body. By using the ambiguous title "angel" and not their names, Jesus protected the pastors' actual identities in the event of external persecution.

Next, the speaker introduces Himself in a unique way to each of the churches. In the Ephesians' case, He self-identifies as "the One who holds the

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seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands." The seven stars (see Rev. 1:16) and golden lampstands are both symbols for the seven churches. The imagery emphasizes the risen Lord's power, authority, and concern for them.

In the second verse the omniscient Lord shows He has full knowledge of everything happening in the Ephesian congregation. He assures them He knows their works, labor, and endurance. Works or deeds is a general term for routine activities of their daily lives in and out of the church setting. Labor is a bit stronger term indicating hard work in ministering to their people and doing evangelism. He likewise is cognizant of their endurance, that is, their steadfast courage in the face of suffering and loss.

Jesus further commends them because they do not tolerate evil people. They simply will not abide false teachers who brazenly call themselves apostles, but are not. The apostles were those few specially called men of God whose authority to teach doctrine was universally accepted in the early churches. Originally the term applied to the twelve selected by Jesus, with Matthias taking the place of Judas (Mark 3:14; Acts 1,2,26). Later, the title apostle was also applied to Paul (Gal. 1:1), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), and James, the brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19).

These self-proclaimed apostles in Ephesus may have been the Nicolaitans, or some other spiritual counterfeiters who were teaching false doctrine and disturbing the fellowship. Probably the evil people were also encouraging immoral practices characteristic of the pagan religions in the city. Thankfully, the leaders of the congregation apparently had thoroughly examined them and found they were in fact liars.

Every generation of Christians is challenged to hold fast to the truth of Christ that was "delivered to the saints once for all" (Jude 3). Doctrinal essentials such as the authority of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the Trinity, and the way of salvation (the Gospel) must be stubbornly upheld in all churches bearing Christ's name. Many modern cults seek to deceive Christians away from the truth to follow false prophets who twist, or add to, the Scriptures to fit their deviant teachings.

Again, in verse three, the Lord commends them for persevering, enduring, and not growing weary. Ephesus was a center of paganism and emperor worship. The church had likely experienced violence, social ostracism, and economic oppression. For "the sake of my name" indicates their faithfulness to Him in the face of those challenges. It is obvious the Ephesian church was determined to do the works of Christ and preserve sound doctrine despite the circumstances.

Up to now the risen Lord has only lavished praise on the Ephesians. When first hearing the letter read, they were probably pretty pleased with themselves. "Hear, hear!" they probably shouted as the "angel" read aloud each commendation. However, in verse four, Jesus' letter takes an unexpected negative turn. He tells the Ephesians He has something against them. Yes, they had done well doing good works and maintaining doctrinal purity, but they had abandoned the "love you had at first." Several questions probably perplexed their minds. What was this "first love" Jesus was talking about? Had they lost the affection they had for each other as fellow believers? Had they abandoned their heartfelt love for Christ and His mission, or were they just going through the motions?

The answer to both of those questions is yes. This was an indictment, not of their actions, but of their motives. The Ephesians' problem was not what they were doing, but why they were doing it. They were callous to their brothers and sisters, and in their love for the Lord and His mission. They labored hard, alright, but they were deficient in the most important thing: love! They apparently had grown cold in their love for each other and for Christ Himself. Yes, they were busy doing religious things and teaching right doctrine, but they lacked the critical ingredient: God's agape love for mankind and Christ!

The Lord presented the problem, but in verse five He offers the solution. He commands them to do two things. First, He says to remember back to when they were young and filled with love. They did God's bidding out of gratitude and devotion. Sadly, as time went by, they had unconsciously lost their inspiration.

The Lord then tells them to "repent, and do the deeds you did at first." Repentance, of course, is a basic requirement to establish or restore one's relationship to God. Repentance is that change of heart that results in a change of attitude and behavior. Unsaved people are commanded to repent of their sins and turn to Jesus for salvation. Believers sometimes must admit their sins and repent when their relationship with God has soured due to sin, weariness, or apathy. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

And what if they ignore His warning? The One (that is, Jesus Himself, v.1) who walks among the lampstands, will be forced to remove theirs from its place. In other words, they will inevitably lose their usefulness to Christ if they do not return to their first love. Too many churches, even many calling themselves evangelical, have lost their zeal to minister the gospel. They must go back to the way they were when they first heard the good news of God's love for them and do good works motivated by their gratitude and love for Him!

The Ephesians had lost the love for God they once felt. He is, nonetheless, pleased with them for their hatred of the false teachings of the Nicolaitans (v. 6). The Nicolaitans were a heretical group that was apparently making inroads in some of the churches in Asia (2:15). The name comes from a term meaning "to conquer the people." The nature of their false teaching is not clear, but Jesus states emphatically that he, like the Ephesians, hates their practices. As we indicated, the Nicolaitans were a sect who disseminated heretical tenets and encouraged immorality. They seduced some people in the church and disrupted its fellowship. Apparently, the church leaders in Ephesus acted swiftly and decisively to rebuke or expel those in the church casting their ungodly spells.

Note, Jesus does not say He hates the Nicolaitans themselves, but only their heretical and immoral practices. God loves all people, but He cannot remain indifferent to sinful beliefs and practices that destroy their souls. Today unbiblical cults go door-to-door seeking to draw undiscerning Christians into their webs of spiritual deceit. We must strongly challenge them with biblical truth shared in love.

In verse seven Jesus uses a metaphor He had utilized before. He once told His disciples, "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen" (Mark 4:9, 23). Obviously everyone who was present had ears and, unless someone was hearing impaired, they heard what He said. But was that Jesus' point? Was He just producing audio waves that could be perceived by any healthy person? Of course not. He was alerting those present that He was communicating some very important information. Therefore, they should pay close attention.

Jesus used the phrase when telling His disciple parables of the Kingdom of God. The truth is, Jesus did not expect most of those listening to understand the real meanings of His stories. He knew most of them did not actually have "ears to hear." Only minds illuminated by the Holy Spirit could, or can, understand the underlying truths He was illustrating by the parables.

In Revelation, chapters two and three, the resurrected Jesus concludes each letter to each church with this instruction, "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The Lord uses the same phraseology that He used when telling His parables. His words would not be comprehensible to those not listening in the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, He equates

His words to the Spirit speaking to them. They must pay close attention and pray for the spiritual illumination necessary to understand what He says to their situations. More importantly they must hear how to apply it.

The words Jesus communicated to the seven Asian congregations still apply to churches today claiming to be authentically Christian. It is still true also that only by the illumination of the Holy Spirit are believers able to comprehend and apply God's Word accurately to their lives.

So, in conclusion, Jesus tells all the churches to listen to the Spirit, but He also closes each letter with a unique promise for each one. The pledges are relevant to each specific situation, but as is true with everything Jesus says, it has a universal application. He directs His promises to "the one who overcomes." The overcomer, or conqueror, is the person and church who, despite hardship, opposition, and even persecution, follows the admonitions of the Lord as given in each letter.

In the Ephesians' case, the overcomer must repent and turn back to his first love. Do that, and God will grant them "the right to eat from the tree of life." First mentioned in Genesis 2:9, it was one of the trees whose fruit Adam and Eve were free to enjoy. It also symbolized eternal life that could have been theirs. However, because they disobeyed God and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were also prevented from eating the fruit of the tree of life and expelled from the Garden of Eden.

However, Jesus will restore access to the tree of life in the coming age (Rev. 22:2,19). He says they will eat "in the Paradise of God." The term paradise is borrowed from an old Persian word meaning a beautiful park. It is used three times in the New Testament as the abode of the righteous dead (Luke 2:23; 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7). So, in the biblical sense, it is understood as a synonym for heaven, where all the lost blessings of the Garden of Eden will be restored in heaven to those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

The promise of everlasting life is the believer's greatest hope. But it is not a hope based on wishful thinking. The Jesus who spoke to John was the same one who was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. That fact is the basis of our confidence that He will keep His promises! "Who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (1 Peter 1:21 NASB).

In the next installment we will examine Jesus' letter to the church in Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11).

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