

Revelation



5. – The Letter to the Church at Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

This letter was sent to the Church at Ephesus. It was sent via an 'angel'. This word means literally a 'messenger'. **Chapter 1:20.**

Ephesus was a City on the coast of the Province of Asia – now part of Turkey. It was a seaport and had become the centre of trade routes. The Church at Ephesus had been initiated by Paul during his second Missionary Journey when he stopped off there on his way back from Corinth to Syria. He went to the Synagogue and reasoned with the Jews who asked him to spend more time with them. He promised that he would return to Ephesus

if it was God's will (**Acts 18:18-22**). It most certainly was God's will and he did return during his third Missionary Journey (**Acts 19**) when he spent between two and three years with the Ephesians. He left the synagogue when some rejected his message and moved into the local community hall where he preached daily. God gave Paul the power to do unusual miracles that is when the handkerchief ministry was started, **Acts 19:8-12**. Then for a final time on his way back to Jerusalem, he stopped at the port of Miletus and summoned the Elders of the Church at Ephesus to come to him. He taught them, then finally saying goodbye knowing that he would never see them again. The Church at Ephesus was very close to Paul's heart. He loved them and prayed for them. He wrote them a letter which was included in the New Testament.

The ensuing letters are written to the seven churches in the province of Asia. There are seven churches and seven unique letters. Interpreters over the years have seen these letters in two distinct ways – the first as a kind of snapshot preview of the church in church history between those days and now where they appear as a downward spiral from faithfulness to lukewarm-ness, and the second as a description of the various types of church that have existed from the time of John's writing of Revelation until the present day. Which of these patterns was Jesus' intention we shall discover when we see Him in Heaven. The fact is that the individual Churches existed.

The general layout of each of these letters takes on the form of Commendation, Complaint and Correction, and is representative of the way in which Jesus deals not only with churches, but also with individuals in churches, today. This is also a good reminder of how we should be as parents, making sure our correction is without condemnation. The wise parent may be proud of her child while at the same time showing them how to improve and the advantage of obedience.



Each of these letters is from Jesus Who describes Himself as having a different characteristic in each letter. John clearly establishes that the seven candlesticks symbolise the seven churches, each of which has a 'lighthouse' and the seven stars are angels or messengers. The Lord instructs John what to write to each Church and reveals that He knows each one intimately. That is the same today. Each Church belongs to the Lord in whatever age, and if we listen to Him, He will instruct us and guide us in our Churches today.

To the Church in Ephesus, Jesus describes Himself as 'holding the seven stars in His right hand'. As we have already seen, each star is a messenger under the authority of Jesus Christ. The seven stars are in His right hand because each Church is under His authority – the right hand represents the position of authority. Each Church is symbolic to the world of His Authority over everything. He also walks amongst His Churches. Each one should be a representation to the world of His Character and the world should be able to see Jesus as it looks at our Church, **Revelation 2:1-3**.

As a Christian, there is nothing we can do, nowhere we can go without taking God with us. He knows our entire deeds even our thoughts and every word before we speak it! Perhaps that knowledge should change the way we choose to live our lives. After all, we have choice, freewill, because that is how God created us. It carries with it responsibility! In the case of the Ephesian Church, Jesus said that He knows their hard work and their perseverance! Let us all examine how hard we work in our churches and in our everyday lives. Those around us need to know that we are people of our word and people who can be trusted to tell the

truth at all times just as our Lord and Saviour, Jesus. We may be the only person who can help in times of another's need. It may be that it requires time and effort to solve that person's problems. Are we willing to put it in? It is important that all the hard work we do is under the direction of the Holy Spirit and not serving our own needs. He will show us how to grow up into Jesus and how to keep our faith strong and pure before God. Obviously the Ephesian Church was known and recognised for that. Jesus commended them for it. Would He commend our Church and us?

Hard work is not the only requirement for a strong Christian life. Jesus requires us to have perseverance and this comes from the testing of our faith. If we handle this God's way we become mature, not lacking anything, **James 1:2-4**. He is aware that we will need to persevere under trials and pressures in our lives. He promises to reward us when we do. Perseverance is essential if we want to walk closely with Jesus and to live our lives fulfilled in His power and Presence, **James 1:12**

Jesus knows that there will be times when we will be tested, perhaps by people who simply hate the fact that we are Christians. It may be that one day we will live in a location where the law prohibits being a Christian. We may be faced with imprisonment, torture and even death itself. When we hold firm to our faith, Jesus promises that we will finally receive the crown of life reserved for us when we die, as we persevere under trial. Death holds no fear for those who love Jesus, **Romans 8:18-27** Paul had been through more suffering and hardship than any one of us could expect to experience in our lifetimes. He had been imprisoned, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, hauled before courts, left for dead, suffered heat, cold, persecution, starvation and much more, yet in these verses, he tells us that it has all been worth it!

As a Church, the Ephesians could not tolerate wicked people, people who say they are somebody but are not. Consequently, we should be vigilant, standing up for what is right in our Churches. The Ephesian Church used as its yardstick the Word of God – the Old Testament and their knowledge of Jesus and any letters that were available to them at that time – together with what Paul had taught them. They had stuck to what they had learned and had tested what people tried to teach them before they believed it, so consequently they had been protected from those who said they were apostles, but instead had tried to bring false teaching into the Church.

There is not much change today! There are people who wish to destroy the very fundamentals of our Faith by bringing in false doctrine, by teaching things that are variations on the truth, or just plain lies. We too must be vigilant! Not everything that is spoken in a Church is the truth. Only that which aligns to God's Word, the Bible, can be entirely relied upon. So beware, always check things against the only reliable source, the Bible!

These Ephesian Christians had faced many forms of hardship. Ephesus was the centre of the cult of worship of Diana (Artemis). So there was significant opposition to any 'new religion'. Not only that, but a massive industry had been built up on Diana-worship. Silversmiths plied their trade and the export of idols and icons was a huge business. Travel to the temple of this goddess was big business and altogether the city relied on its income from this source. Paul had arrived there explaining that their goddess was really no goddess at all, and that they should instead believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus accepted no idol worship and He lives in us, not in temples made with hands. Imagine the opposition! Christians living in and under such circumstances were persecuted. They would have found difficulty getting suitable jobs, been prevented from worshipping together and endured many other hardships. But throughout it all, Jesus commended them for their perseverance and for the fact that they had not grown weary in their trials. What would you and I have done? Would we have been tempted to compromise in order to keep our families from trouble? Would we have found it easier to be 'silent believers'? These Ephesian Christians were commended for their faithfulness.

But Jesus did have some things about which to complain to the Ephesian Church, **Revelation 2:4-5**. First, He said that they had forsaken their first love for Him. Can we remember how excited we were as we began our walk with Jesus as new Believers? It was a wonderful time of exploring our new faith, reading God's love letter to us – the Bible. It was amazing as we saw God answer our prayers. As we live our lives as Christians, we should constantly review where we stand. If we are not advancing in the Christian life – learning more about Jesus and having a closer relationship with Him – then we are falling away. We should constantly measure ourselves against what we have learned about Jesus and how we are progressively moving forward. Maybe our good works now come from duty rather than zeal for Jesus and His Church.

The solution to falling away is to repent and to get back to where we were in the first place, **Revelation 2:5**. Failure to do this on a Church level will mean only one thing. Jesus will remove His Light from its place –

the place where He walks! How desperate a situation! Unfortunately, this is the truth about some Churches today. Can a Church function without having the Presence of Jesus and His Light? The answer is that it can go through the motions. The religion will continue but the Life will have disappeared. Eventually, the true Believers will go elsewhere – to a place where there is Life, where there is freedom, not restriction.

However, there was one thing that the Ephesians had in their favour, Revelation 2:6. They abhorred the Nicolaitans whom Jesus also hated. The Nicolaitans were a heretical sect within the church that had worked out a compromise with the pagans. Spiritual liberty gave them sufficient leeway to practise idolatry and immorality as they pleased. Like one foot in the Church and one in the world. How does that measure up to the church today with its lax standards and compromise on such sin as homosexuality and the secret sin of pornography? We should hate the sin, but love the sinner!

The Nicolaitans are symbolic name of a party that represents the hierarchy of a ruling class over the rest of the people, developing a *pecking order* of fleshly leadership. Incorrect elevation over and separation of the ministers from the laity is wrong in God's sight and He hates the lust for religious power over others. The reason that the 'leaders' do not want the Presence of the Lord in the midst of the congregation is that they will have to relinquish their crowns. Generally there is an ungodly spiritual authority in the Church today, which is nothing more than the prideful spirit of control, manipulation, domination, intimidation and a rebellion against the rightful authority of God. Shepherds serve the sheep, but the wolves that clothe themselves with so-called leadership and spiritual authority serve themselves, thinking that they serve God, but in essence, making them false christs. Beware! Early church leaders were established as overseers, not a ruling hierarchy. Jesus wants servants who will defer the authority to their Lord Jesus and care for His sheep. Different people in the church have different gifts and ministries from God, but all are of equal importance to the wellbeing of the whole body. This is seen in all churches today and a warning to all who want a ministry position. Leaders are servants of all.

Jesus writes to the Church at Ephesus with the exhortation to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Churches there, but we should also hear what He is saying to us today. This exhortation is timeless in the sense that it speaks to every Christian in every age. There is a fantastic promise to those who overcome, who are victorious, and overcome the opposition that Satan attempts to put in their way. Jesus' promise to those overcomers from the Church at Ephesus is:

"To those who are victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God." **Revelation 2:7**

The mention of the Tree of Life takes us back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve ate of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, **Genesis 3:21-24**. Now Jesus promises to provide access to the Tree of Life, and of course those who overcome, who are victorious, will be granted the right to eat from it. The Tree of Life has never been destroyed, but is now located in the Paradise of God. The intention here is to show us the restoration for Believers, to the perfect world that existed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, but this time in Heaven and now for eternity. Let that Truth really take hold of your whole self and see yourself in the Paradise of God, fellowshiping with God every moment. This is for all Believers who overcome the wiles of Satan, and to those Believers who are victorious in Jesus Christ.

"Remember those early days after you first saw the light? Those were the hard times! Kicked around in public, targets of every kind of abuse—some days it was you, other days your friends. If some friends went to prison, you stuck by them. If some enemies broke in and seized your goods, you let them go with a smile, knowing they couldn't touch your real treasure. Nothing they did bothered you, nothing set you back. So don't throw it all away now. You were sure of yourselves then. It's **still** a sure thing! But you need to stick it out, staying with God's plan so you'll be there for the promised completion. It won't be long now, He's on the way; He'll show up most any minute. But anyone who is right with Me thrives on loyal trust; if he cuts and runs I won't be very happy. But we're not quitters who lose out. Oh, no! We'll stay with it and survive, trusting all the way." **Hebrews 10:32-39 Msg**

Return to your first passion and zeal for Jesus Christ. Make Him the focus of all things. If you have a very busy life, commit to getting up early, to praying and worshiping, giving your day to God. You think you can't afford the time but you can't afford not to!!

5. Revelation 2:1-7 – The Church in Ephesus – Challenge Questions

- 1. Read the Notes and the Bible Verses** referred to in them. Highlight the points that 'speak' to you. Be prepared to share in your group.

- Read Revelation 2:8-11 – The Letter to the Church in Smyrna.**
- 2.** Why do you think Jesus says to the Church at Smyrna that He is the First and the Last and that He was dead and is alive? What difference would that assertion make to the Believers at Smyrna?

- 3.** What do you think Smyrna was going through from what Jesus said in **Revelation 2:9**?

- 4.** It has been said that the Church at Smyrna was afflicted and poor because its people spoke negatively over themselves, and they should have been rich because that is what Jesus said about them. Comment on this statement and indicate whether you think that this statement is right or wrong with your reasons.

- 5.** Why did Jesus say that He knew about the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not?

- 6.** Was this important for the Church at Smyrna to understand and why?

- 7.** Was the threat of imprisonment for the crime of being a Christian of concern to the Church at Smyrna?

