

STUDY 1 - REVELATION 2:1-7 THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS

The first of the seven letters is addressed to the church in Ephesus. This church may be addressed first as the city was the largest of the seven. At the time of Revelation it had a population of 1/4 million. It was famous for its banks and buildings and harbour. Like all large cities it was attracted people from all over the world. It was known as "the light of Asia".

Like all large cities Ephesus also had its dark side. Promiscuity and immorality were rife, and in Ephesus there was the pagan temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In the days of Revelation an "Ephesian letter" was a slang term for a magic spell.

There was a well established church in Ephesus. It was planted by Paul around 52AD on his third missionary journey, and the apostle spent two years there. In 62AD Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians. Timothy served the church in Ephesus. According to some traditions John had served as pastor of the church there.

In these verses the risen, glorious, majestic Lord Jesus Christ addresses his church in Ephesus. As we study these letters it would be good to keep reminding ourselves of the description of our Lord Jesus Christ in 1:12-20. He reminds us that it is he who speaks, and that he walks among and rules his church (2:1).

He addresses the church, as he does to all the churches, "to the angel of the church in Ephesus". This is a somewhat cryptic statement. Is this referring to a heavenly being who oversees a local church? Possibly. It's equally possible that the word "angel" can be translated "messenger" - which might be referring to the local church leadership.

Jesus has much to commend this church. They are a working, persevering church concerned for theological faithfulness. They have kept going as a church in a hard place, and have faced real hardships for being the church of Jesus Christ (verse 3). They have tested false teachers, and refused to tolerate them (verse 3). They are busy, discerning and steadfast - and Jesus genuinely praises his church for that.

This should be an encouragement to us. There is no work done for Jesus that he does not see (verse 2). Sometimes we can make it feel a bit harsh for taking doctrine seriously and not permitting all kinds of teachings in the

church that bear the name "Christian", but again, Jesus sees and praises us when we do that. We may sometimes feel like we are tempted to "grow weary" of keeping going, but Jesus knows, and sees, and praises.

It is not all praise in this letter though. In verses 4 and 5 the Lord brings a serious charge against the Ephesian church. It is not enough for a church to be concerned for orthodoxy and to be hard working and persevering. There is something very important lacking if we do all these things yet "have forsaken your first love".

What exactly is the problem with the church at Ephesus? Obviously the expression in verse 4 points to the fact that they once knew a passion which they have now turned their back on. It is easy to imagine this church being like a marriage between a husband and wife which began with great passion, but is now dutiful, faithful, but loveless. It may be that Christ is saying her passion for him has grown dim, that she is a church that does a lot and are concerned for right teaching, but she has lost a real, living, loving relationship with her Lord and Saviour. Certainly this would be a serious criticism, and something to repent of immediately.

However, there may be more to verse 4 than a command to explore our feelings. The remedy the Lord gives is verse 5, and it's a surprising one if the problem mere lies within. "Repent and do the works you did at first". This lack of their first love has lead to works that are not happening that they used to do.

Then we need to notice the warning Jesus gives. "If you do not repent, I will come and remove the lamp stand from your place". The lamp stand is a symbol of the church (see 1:20). It may be that Jesus is saying that if love for him dies, then he will let the church in Ephesus die. He will not let his name be tarnished by dead orthodoxy.

But the warning may be even more closely tied to the charge Jesus brings. The lamp stand is a symbol of the church, because the church is to bring the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. So the first love they have forsaken may be the love for Christ which leads to them taking the gospel out into the world. The works they need to do (verse 5) are evangelistic works.

Putting all of this together, it is possible that the Lord Jesus is saying that to be theological orthodox and hard working in the church is not enough. His church is to love him in a way that means they cannot resist taking the gospel out of the church into the world around in obedience to his command.

We must never put evangelism and theological accuracy and obedience against each other though. We need to be obedient in every way. In verse 6 Jesus returns to praise the church for "hating the practices of the Nicolaitans". It's not fully clear what these were, but they seemed to have been a group in the church who advocated some kind of moral compromise. Jesus is saying we must be salt and light in the world - going to make disciples without becoming like the world around us.

The letter concludes, as all the letters do, with a call and a promise. It is important to note that although the letters are written to churches, and possibly addressed initially to the leaders, it is every individual members responsibility to act (note the shift in language from plural to singular "he....to him"). The letters are the voice of our Trinitarian God - Jesus the Son speaks, as does the Father (1:4), and we are told hear the Spirit is speaking.

The promise for those who hear and respond ("he who overcomes") is eternal security. It points forward to the great images that close the book in 22:2-4. The way to rekindle our first love and to ignite passion for spreading the gospel is to look at his great love for us.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Remind yourself of 1:12-20. Who is speaking to the churches? What particularly does he remind the Ephesian church about himself at the start of the letter to them?

What does the Lord Jesus Christ "know" about this church? Can you put together a picture in your mind of what life had looked like in this church over the months/years leading up to this letter? (verses 2-3)

What encouragement is it to us that Jesus sees and knows these things? How does that give us fuel to keep going? What does Jesus hold against this church? (verse 4). What does this say about the limits of what they have been doing?

How does Jesus say they should repent, and what is his warning to them if they don't? (verse 5). Does this help us to understand what specifically "forsaking your first love" looks like in a church?

I'm sure we've all visited churches which may have seemed very 'faithful' yet were dull and had seemed to have lost their evangelistic passion, whereas

we may have visited churches which were very concerned for the lost yet did not seem to be very discerning in their teaching. How does this letter show us that both are vital?

Which are we (personally, or as a church) tempted to downplay?

Who's responsibility is it to hear and obey this letter? (verse 7). What is promised if we do?