

THE CHURCH THAT LEFT ITS FIRST LOVE

The Message to Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: ²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. ³I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

Brief historical context:

Ephesus was once the home to the Apostle John and a growing vibrant church. John’s faith in the resurrected Jesus offended the worship and loyalty to the many gods of Rome, including Caesar. So John was imprisoned on the Island of Patmos 50 miles off the coasts of Turkey.

The City of Ephesus sat on the edge of a major sea port and had connections with the known world. So the city was rich and very cosmopolitan. People from all over the world lived in Ephesus, making the city known for its lively social life.

The goddess Artemis had a very central place in the city of Ephesus. Among the 14 pagan temples, none rival the Temple of Artemis. Ephesus was the headquarters of the cult worship to her, which included seductive rampant sexual orgies.

The city of Ephesus also hosted the Temple to Domitian. He was one of the emperors next to Nero who brutally persecuted Christians. The Agora (market place), was the centre of city life. Goods from all over the known world were sold there. At the entrance of the Agora there was an incense burner, and in order to enter in good faith, shoppers had to take incense and dropped it into the incense burner as an act of loyalty to the emperor. This was indeed a great challenge to the Christians.

Domitian built his temple on the highest point of Ephesus. He was intent that all will praise and worship him — those who refused were brutally persecuted. The emperors used names such as ‘saviour, lord, master, son of man and god — the whole empire were to worship Caesar (the emperors), and to publicly affirm the emperor with their own voice. All this greatly challenged the Ephesian Christians.

Another unsettling reality for the Church in the city of Ephesus was the presence of demons and demonic activities. Oracles (priests) spoke for the gods/goddesses working demonic miraculous signs and casting spells on people. The reality of the demonic underworld was very much at work in the city of Ephesus. So when the Apostle Paul wrote these words in Ephesian 6:12-13, the Ephesian Christians fully understood what he was saying to them:

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore, take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm”.

The Church of Ephesus constantly lived under the shadows of pagan cult worship, the reality of the demonic underworld, and the challenge to compromise their faith to fit in socially and/or to get by economically day by day.

Jesus' Identity:

Jesus identifies himself to the Church of Ephesus as 'the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'

Message:

- I know your works...
- Nevertheless, I have this against you...
- You have left your first love...
- Repent and do the works you did at first...
- If not, I will remove your lampstand (your effectiveness)...
- Yet, this is to your credit... you hate false teachings...

First (love) — of most importance, top priority — "*You have lost your early love*" recalls the charge against Israel in Jeremiah 2:2 and Hosea 2:14-16:

Lampstand — light in the darkness, effectiveness

The Church of Ephesus no longer did church because they love Jesus — but Jesus wants relationship, not just duty. If they don't correct their *loveless labour* Jesus threatened them to remove their lampstand (their effectiveness). Repentance will lead to them doing the works they have done before (at first).

Nicolaitans — a sect in the early church that held to the teaching that the body was insignificant, so do with it whatever you wish — it's okay to indulge in all kinds of sexual immorality and eat meat sacrifice to idols (participating in idol feast) etc.

Those who overcome I will give to them the '**Tree of Life planted in the paradise of God**' — perhaps a reference to the 'Temple of Artemis'. There was a gigantic 'tree of life' in the temple outer court yard (a so called) source of hope and fullness of life. Also the emperors had a beautiful garden where they hosted honoured guests.

Jesus says to the Church of Ephesus, stay faithful, I have a great reward for you, great will be your reward in heaven. In other words, suffer for a while the temporary exclusions from the earthly tree of life and the earthly paradise of the emperors — **I will give to you the 'Tree of Life planted in the paradise of God.**

Relevance:

All that we do should be out of love for and worship to Jesus. Jesus wants relationship not just duty (loveless labour).

Counter cultural discussion points:

- What does it mean today for Christians to be counter cultural?
- Are we prepared to suffer now, in order to receive God's eternal rewards later?