

Truth for Today

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Ephesians - it's all about Christ: Letter to Ephesus - Revelation 2:1-7

Recent talks have been about The Epistle to the Ephesians which was written by the Apostle Paul in the middle of the first century AD. It touches a very high point of Christian teaching and decorum. We might well wonder how the Ephesian Christians got on afterwards. Significantly, we are not left to guess. At the end of that century, the Apostle John was granted a personal vision of the Lord Jesus, in which he was given messages from the Lord to write and have delivered to seven Christian churches in what was then known as Asia. We now know that area as Turkey. The record of the vision is given in the Book of Revelation 1:12-18.

The first message, recorded in Revelation 2:1-7, was addressed to the church at Ephesus. In the message, the Lord Jesus gives his own assessment as to how the Christian church at Ephesus had developed since they had received the original Epistle from the Apostle Paul. The letter notes the signs of the beginning of the sad general decline of the responsible Christian profession from the day on which the church was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost. Scripture predicts, and history records, the sad fact that this decline would continue, and will go on until those who are Christ's are caught up at the Rapture to be forever with the Lord. Right at the beginning of the church's history, there were elements creeping in that were contrary to the revealed will of God. However, there were also those who could discern the adverse trend. Because of their personal sense of commitment they were deeply disturbed. Sadly, others did not seem to notice, or even care.

The decline in the attitude towards evil can be readily traced in this projected history of the church, beginning with Ephesus. At the beginning, there were certainly those who could not bear with evil. Before very long, in the next phase, the evil began to be tolerated. Later still, the evil was generally accepted. Eventually, there were those involved who were prepared to actively go over to evil and actually oppose the truth.

Ephesus is now three miles inland, due to the silting up of the estuary on which it sits. It was formerly a major sea port, and centre of international trading, but it has lapsed from its former importance and significance. This is in itself a parallel with the spiritual picture and moral state of that which in a general way is pleased to call itself Christian. This message, then, refers dispensationally to the early days of Christianity. Even during the lifetime of the Apostle Paul, departure from the faith had already begun. When Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy he said, "All they which are in Asia have turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1:15). In turning away from him they were turning away from his teaching. This would have included Ephesus.

The first obvious question is, "Why is Ephesus first?" Now, the Christians there were the product of Paul's ministry. In the Epistle to the Ephesians the top stone of Christian ministry is reached. This brings to mind at least two possible reasons why it was appropriate that the Ephesians were addressed first. On the one hand, when God begins to criticise, He starts with that which is nearest and dearest to Himself, 1 Peter 4:17 tells us: "judgment must begin at the house of God". Secondly, Satan always attacks the choicest. However, while Paul's ministry had been the means whereby they had been established, it was left to John to write to them now. One valid reason for this might be because Paul had already lamented that all in Asia had turned away from him. Thus, if Paul had written to them, they might never have listened to him. So, the responsibility was given to John. Also, circumstantially, it is a very practical point that by this time Paul was almost certainly no longer alive.

The message begins with a dramatic presentation of Christ, highlighting some of the features that John had seen in the vision recorded in Revelation 1. Graciously, the Lord speaks first of what He can commend. He then speaks of the failure in their local witness to Himself. The address closes with a challenge from the Holy Spirit to the church. The motive is to promote "overcoming" in those who are exercised to be faithful to the Lord in His absence, and to stimulate their affections now to hold on while they wait for the Coming of the Lord.

Let us look at the detail of some of the terms used.

Verse 1: “Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.”

The term “angel” here is representative of the responsible element in the local church, those who are committed to looking after the Lord’s interests in their own locality. This is a vital work. The word “holdeth” signifies “holding in a mighty grip”, with all the power of the Godhead. In relation to redemption, He has sat down for ever (Hebrews 1:3, Hebrews 10:12). That work is complete, never needing to be repeated. But here the Lord is walking - still active. He looks for those who will move sympathetically with Him in the establishment of His interests here in this world.

A star bears light from heaven. So, the stars here are individual light-bearers, bearing light from heaven; those who guide the local Christians according to the will of God, especially in a time of moral darkness. The stars are in His right hand, the place of divine support and power. It is only as we realise that we are sustained by the Lord and held by Him, that we can shine in this dark world. The walking is spoken of in the present tense. He is active in His present work. He sees everything that we are doing, and evaluates the witness we are giving. He is in the midst, not on the periphery! He knows exactly what is going on. The golden lampstands represent that which is according to God, seen here as bearing light in this world. This is a major function of a local assembly.

Verse 2: “I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.”

“I know.” He knows what is going on. This is characteristic of Him. He is omniscient. There is nothing that the Lord Jesus does not know about us, either in our individual lives, or in what is taking place in His church.

First, He commends what is commendable, before directing their attention to what needs remedying. He takes account of their works, labour and patience. However, He does not speak, as Paul does in writing to the Thessalonians of their “work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). This suggests that while the work itself might have been adequate, it may have been lacking in true motive and aim. These things which accompany salvation (faith, love, hope) come together at least 10 times in the New Testament. They are well worth looking up to see the emphasis in each case.

Everything must be tested against what is due to His Name, “for My Name’s sake”. His honour is paramount. His glory must be maintained. He quotes a local example. Local impostors had been tested by the Ephesians and demonstrated to be liars, in spite of their extravagant claim to be apostles. The Lord gives them due credit for that.

Verse 3: “And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my Name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.”

Patience and endurance born of faithfulness to the Name of Christ will always receive the Lord’s support and commendation.

Verse 4: “Nevertheless I have against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”

“I have against thee.” Privilege brings responsibility. The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. The great privileges and blessings given to the Ephesians placed commensurately great responsibility upon them.

“Thou hast left thy first love.” First love is the best love of which they were spiritually capable. First, not in time, or in quantity, but first in rank, in quality, as the primary, motivating consideration. The same word is translated in Luke 15:22 to describe a robe as the “best” robe, and in 1 Timothy 1:15 when Paul describes himself as the “chief” of sinners. First in rank, best, chief; these words together give us a fair understanding of what the word conveys. Although the phrase “first love” is not actually used in the Epistle to the Ephesians, what is involved in the term is expounded and amplified in the detail of that Epistle.

Verse 5: “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

“Remember.” “Recall to mind from whence thou art fallen.” Notwithstanding their relatively good general condition, the Lord has to speak of them as “fallen”, because they had left their first love. If our primary motive in life and service is anything other than true love for the Lord Jesus, then our service may count little in His estimation, even though it might appear diligent in the sight of others.

“Repent!” What? Even a Christian? Oh, Yes! Especially a Christian! Weigh things thoroughly, sincerely, honestly in the presence of God and accept and agree with His righteous judgment about it. Repentance always leads to and is

an essential step towards recovery. If first love has departed, repentance will bring us back to our first love. If there is self-judgment with regard to the things drawn to their attention, this will lead to recovery. Repentance and recovery are the true precursors to the shining of the true light on earth.

“Repeat” the first works; resume doing them! This would result in growth in the assembly, and in their witness in a world without Christ. But first works cannot be done without first love. First works are the product of first love. If we lose “first love”, service in itself will not necessarily receive His commendation. When the church at Ephesus got away from its “first love”, it ceased to do the “first works”. It was no longer answering to the purpose for which the Lord had left it here, and so He threatens to remove the candlestick. This means that it would no longer shine as a light in testimony for Him.

“I will come.” His imminent return is the plumbline when and by which all is and shall be measured.

“I will remove Thy lampstand”. Their personal responsibility is stressed. If the assembly fails in testimony, **their** lamp must be removed. The responsible testimony must be taken out of **their** hands, and placed in the hands of others who will be faithful to their responsibilities - compare Matthew 25, Luke 19 with the Scripture here. It is much happier to have Him coming to us on the line of John 14:3 and 18 than on the line of Revelation 2:5.

Verse 6: “But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.”

The Lord Himself “loved righteousness and hated iniquity” (Psalm 45:7, quoted of the Lord in Hebrews 1:9). These qualities in Christians are the product of first love, which engenders faithfulness to Him.

If I lose or abandon my first love for the Lord, I will eventually give to man the first place that is due to Christ alone. The “Nicolaitanes” were so-called “conquerors of the people”, “champions of the world”. The rise of an elite group who monopolise church decision-making and responsibilities denies the Headship of Christ, the Lordship of Christ and the promptings of the Spirit. Man is given the place Christ should have. The folly of this is immediately seen. The Nicolaitanes cleared off when suffering was involved (at Smyrna), but came back when the assembly was given a place in the world (at Pergamos). When gift is controlled by the wrong lordship, it brings in spiritual death amongst the Lord’s people. The Lord commends them for taking a stand against anyone who was displacing Him from His Lordship in the assembly.

Verse 7: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

“He that hath an ear.” The Lord raises the matter of having an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying. Every believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and so is capable of knowing what the Lord Jesus would say to him at any time. It is not just the privilege of a certain few, with special ability and qualifications. It is open to every believer. We all need to examine, in the light of God’s word, everything that is being done in the church. In particular, we need to examine our own lives. We must apply self-judgment before we attempt to judge others. (Matthew 7:1-6)

Amidst all this, there is a commendation and reward for the overcomer, one committed to be faithful to the Lord in His absence, in an evil day, whatever the enmity and opposition. “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the Tree of Life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden - they could not be allowed to eat of the Tree of Life in their fallen state (Genesis 3:24). Sin had come in and destroyed life according to God. But we read again of the Tree of Life in Revelation 22:1-2: “He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the Tree of Life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations”.

These verses describe a scene where everything is of God and the Lamb, constantly maintained by the Holy Spirit of God. Life is abundant. Death and the curse can never enter. Every adverse effect that sin brought in will be healed. Men will serve God willingly. They will always be before His face. They will be known by the Name of their God.

In the midst is the Tree of Life. God is the source of life. Christ is the embodiment of that life to Christians, so that they can feed on that life of which God is the source. The Tree of Life brings to us the preciousness of Christ. Christ personally will be the One Who will cause this world to be fruitful for God. His power will be seen and felt all over the world. He will administer the blessings of God throughout a cleansed universe of bliss. All will be fresh and new.

There is always a reward to anyone who responds to Christ. The overcomer is given to eat now of the Tree of Life, now in foretaste, then finally the actuality in Paradise. He can feed now on the One who will sustain everything in this

world for God's pleasure throughout the one thousand year reign of Christ. Men will then serve God willingly. They will be known by the name of their God, and will always be before His face. An overcomer is one who responds to Christ now, in days of departure from the faith, and gets the present gain of that which will be enjoyed universally when Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords.

If we are feeding on the great Sustainer of Life according to God, we ourselves shall be sustained for God and His pleasure in this present world today.

The Epistle to the Ephesians anticipates that wonderful time, and is achievable and to be enjoyed by those who assimilate Ephesian truth and respond to it in the faith of their souls.

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