



To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.'

Revelation 2:1-3 ESV

Introduction

In Revelation 1, Christ walks in the midst of the Church universal, represented by seven lampstands. In Revelation 2 to 3, He brings comfort and correction to this worldwide Church through seven letters. As we will see, the central concern in each of these letters is that we come to love the Lord as He does us. The call to reclaim such love undergirds the seven letters to the churches and fills all Scripture. It also dominates the opening letter in John's Revelation, that to the Ephesians. We may summarize this letter with four words: *prominence*, *priority*, *prescription*, and *promise*.

Prominence

The first letter was intended for the church in Ephesus. Serving as the gateway to Asia Minor, Ephesus was the most influential city of those housing the seven churches. If Pergamum was Asia Minor's political capital, Ephesus was its commercial capital. The main port town of the region, Ephesus pulsated with trade and business, which flowed from its waterways and roadways as blood flows from the heart.

The Roman Empire came alive in Ephesus. The Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was enthroned there. This shrine to the Greek goddess of fertility was almost four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. It was trafficked by thousands of temple prostitutes, priests, dancers, musicians, and frenzied worshipers, who all payed homage to the many-breasted image of Diana which they claimed fell out of the heavens. Greco-Roman society's love for Greek gods was matched only by their love of Greek sport and philosophy. Athletic competitions rivaling the Olympics stirred the populace of Ephesus which filled the largest outdoor theatre in Asia Minor. There, some 25,000 fans were mesmerized by golden-tongued orators and cheered fights to the death between men and beast.

It was into this city of great prominence that Paul would infuse the message of God's love. He strategically focused his time and tireless efforts in Ephesus for nearly three years, surpassing the time he spent ministering in any other location (Acts 20:31). On his third missionary journey, when he began his ministry in that thriving metropolis, Paul knew that the soil had already been softened for the seed of the Gospel by his coworkers Priscilla and Aquila and watered by the eloquent preaching of Apollos (Acts 18:18-26). Paul taught daily about the prominence of the biblical God over the Greek pantheon of gods. The impact of his teaching reached far and wide (Acts 19). As a result, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

Once his ministry in Ephesus was complete, Paul sensed that he would not return. He entrusted the work to his faithful protégé, Timothy. Coworkers Onesiphorus and Tychicus also lent their support (1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:16-18, 4:12). Finally, according to the writings of the early church, John the Apostle is believed to have dedicated the last few decades of his life to pastor the Ephesian believers. It was likely from Ephesus that John wrote his three letters, 1-3 John, after which he was apprehended, chained, and banished to Patmos. It was in exile that John received the revelation that would remind believers of all ages about God's first priority.

'But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where 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. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.'

Revelation 2:4-6 ESV

Priority

In his letter to Ephesians, Jesus introduces himself as “him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, [and] who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (Revelation 2:1). The Greek word for “hold,” *kratein*, speaks of a strong and complete grasp. It reminds us that no matter what God's people face, God is in control, protecting and guiding them corporately and individually. Hence the personal admonition found at the close of this and each of the letters to the churches, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:7, 11,17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Are we listening?

Before rebuking the Ephesians, the Lord commended them: “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary” (Revelation 2:2-3).

The Ephesians were unswerving in their orthodox teachings and ongoing labors for the Lord. Hard work and sound doctrine are two legs on the platform of any good ministry. Without a third leg, however, such ministry will not stand. The love of God is that third leg. If our words and work do not come from the heart, they are not genuine. Thus the Lord's reproach: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.” (Revelation 1:4)

Religion without heart is dead. This truth is made evident throughout the Scriptures, from beginning to end. A surrendered heart, key to the bright exploits of King David, was sadly lacking in the life of King Saul. Later, in the New Testament, Saul the Pharisee needed spiritual heart correction before he could become Paul the Apostle the man who would establish the church in Ephesus. Jesus, during His three-year ministry, gave His sternest rebuke to the Pharisees, who had the pretense of religion but had lost sight of its purpose (Matthew 23:1-36). Now, the Church in Ephesus had lapsed into the same insidious sin.

Without a genuine love for the Lord, good works and sound teachings about God become repugnant to God (Amos 5:21-23). As sometimes happens with second generation Christians, the Ephesians maintained a firm grasp on the principles and practices of Christianity but lacked passion for the God from whom such principles and practices came. They had forgotten that the **Great Commandment** was to be their first priority.

Prescription

The Ephesians had done well to “hate the works of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:6), who apparently encouraged the kind of compromise that had been exhibited by Balaam in the Old Testament (Revelation 2:2:14-15). According to the writings of some Early Church leaders, this group arose in the name of Nicolas, one of the original deacons of the church and a proselyte from Antioch (Acts 6:5). It has been suggested he did not maintain a firm stand against the pagan and occult practices from which he had come. Followers carrying his name soon allowed such carelessness to become compromise, blending Greek superstition and idolatry with Hebrew belief and worship. They had misplaced foundational priorities, devaluing their first love for God.

A similar problem had invaded the Ephesian community. The very people who had soundly re-

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

Revelation 2:7 ESV

jected the ways of the Nicolaitans needed to examine their own lives. And they would need to apply the antidote for displaced love which was comprised of two primary ingredients, they were to remember and repent. John wrote, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first." (Revelation 2:5)

First, they must remember their first love. It is difficult to reclaim what has been forgotten. For example, think of a marriage counselor, urging a middle-aged couple to reclaim their first love. She may ask them to remember how sweet their gentle affection was before careers and household concerns distracted them, diluting their shared affections.

The Ephesians also needed to repent. True repentance creates a change of heart which impacts the whole life. Such repentance leads us to do the works we did at first. If you can think of a time when you spent more time in prayer and Bible study than now, had more passion to tell others about your Savior than now, were more diligent to use your spiritual gifts than now, you may in those very memories find room to repent, and do the things you did at first.

The Ephesians were warned that if they did not get their hearts right with God, the consequences would be dramatic. "If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Revelation 2:5). Scholars note the prophetic potency of these words. Over the generations, the silting action of the Cayster River overtook the harbor at Ephesus. Relentless sediment accumulated around its shorelines, extending them so far that the entire city lost its functionality as a port town. Ruins of the ancient city are now found some six miles inland from the Aegean Sea.

What a fitting parable to remind us of the need to guard our hearts, "for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Only the attentive effort to follow God's will through His Word and prayer will keep our heart channels clear of the earth's silt and sediment. Those who do not keep their thought life and motivations unsoiled will eventually become overwhelmed by the dark and miry sludge of the world which has settled over them, diminishing their light for God.

Promise

Each letter to the churches closes with a promise to the one who conquers, not the least of which is that given to the Ephesians: "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:7)

God's first priority, as stated throughout the Bible, is to have a people who will walk in fellowship and joy with Him forever. God's original offer of eternal life, represented by the tree of life, will be offered not just to Adam and Eve but to all who overcome (Genesis 2:4-17, Revelation 22:1-2). He loves us and wants nothing more than to bring us home where we can enjoy the riches of His love and care. A simple recognition of this truth is life changing.

Final Summary

To love someone is to risk rejection. Not so when we love God, for His love for us is unrelenting, eternal, higher than the heavens. Not to receive and live in God's love is to reject all that really matters. Thus we are wise to love God and others. In the words of C. S. Lewis:

“There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket — safe, dark, motionless, airless — it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable ... The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York, 1960), page 169.

Spending Time With God

This 12-week study series, “Revelation Made Relevant,” is designed to supplement your personal and small group Bible study. The Devotion questions are written for your personal study. The Discussion questions are especially for small groups. Members who answer the questions ahead of time can bring more insight into their small group meeting. The Digging Deeper questions are for those who wish for more personal or small group study. As you spend time with God, may His Word enrich your life and enhance your daily walk with Him. Pray, asking God for special insight into His Word.

Devotion: Personal Study

1. What idea from the message or the commentary especially encouraged you? Why?

2. Why do you think the first letter in Revelation 2 focuses on the call to love God? Do you know of other Scriptures that speak of the priority of love? If so, list some.

3. Read 1 Corinthians 13, reflecting afresh on these often quoted words. Based on this chapter, why is love the “greatest” (1 Corinthians 13:13)?

4. Replace every occurrence of the word “love” in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 with your name. Which of the qualities listed seem to be areas where you are doing well? Why?

5. Which of the qualities listed seem to be areas where you need the most work? Pray specifically for God’s love to fill you and to permeate your life and relationships.



SERIES

REVELATION MADE RELEVANT

LESSON 4

Reclaiming Love | Revelation 2:1-7

Discussion: Small Group Study

6. Are there insights or concerns from the Personal Study questions that you would like to explore more fully with the group? If so, which?

7. The commentary mentions the prominence of Ephesus, and the effect Paul's ministry had on Asia Minor. One man, one family, or one church can have significant impact on the world. In what ways are you, your family, or your church situated uniquely for ministry? Be specific.

8. Revelation 2:1-7 focuses on the priority of love. Read Matthew 22:36-40. What about the Great Commandment do you find most difficult? Why?

9. Read 1 John 4:19. Think about times that God's love in your heart enabled you to love the seemingly unlovable. Describe one such instance, if you can.

10. The prescription for living in God's love is first to remember (Revelation 2:5). Ponder your prayer life, your patterns of Bible reading, and your passion for the Lord in prior days. Do such memories inspire you to grow more in love for God today? Why or why not?

11. We are also called to repent, to change our course. Look again at the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40), list specific areas in which you need to repent. Pray for God's help to change and to love Him more and to love your neighbor without compromise.

Digging Deeper: Further Study

12. Think about the life of Jesus and how he rebuked the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-36). Do you think he spoke against their hard hearts because he hated or loved them? How might loving a person who is not right with God actually make you bolder about what is right and good?

13. We often feel more loved by our pets than by people. Based on what you know about the Biblical meaning of love (*agape*: a self-sacrificing love that does not depend on the response of the recipient), describe how God's love in a person can be much greater than that coming from even the most loyal of pets.

14. The first letter in Revelation 2 closes with a great promise (Revelation 2:7). Compare with Revelation 22:1-5. What do such promises mean to you? How should believing them impact your life? Be specific.

15. Do you think it safe to say on some level that the quality of love in a person's heart before they die may say something about where they will spend eternity? Why or why not? (Consider the C. S. Lewis quote above in the Final Summary).

Scripture for Meditation

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Revelation 2:4-5 ESV