

# Letters to the Seven Churches: Ephesus

REVELATION 2:1-7

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**\*\*COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE\*\***

It is good to be with you this morning. I hope your 2021 is going well! So far, so good. I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper, as we will be partaking of the Supper right after our study this morning. And then, Josh will be leading us in "Yield Not to Temptation" (#798).

As our tradition has been, we are starting this morning with God's plan of salvation, and we do this every week, because we don't know whether this will be perhaps the first or the last time that somebody might be joining us – either here in this building, online, or on the phone. And everybody needs to know that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to this earth to live a perfect life and then to offer himself as a sacrifice. After his death on the cross, he was buried, and then he was raised up on the third day. In response, we believe the message, his love motivates us to turn away from sin, we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, please get in touch.

And once again, we have several examples this morning – men and women from around the world who have obeyed the good news over the past several days, starting with two men and two women baptized by Esudas Bontha, in India, just a few days ago. I probably won't meet these people in this life, but I hope to meet them in the next!

We also have two more baptisms from the Honolulu congregation this week! Lina and Basilia obeyed the gospel two days ago. They are the two women in the middle. We rejoice with our Christian family in Hawaii this week.

And then we also have an interesting situation that happened in Niger in the recent past, reported to us by Barry Baggott, who has dedicated his life to preaching God's love to the French-speaking world. Niger is located in north-central Africa, directly north of Nigeria, to the northeast of Ghana, and a good part of Niger is located in the Sahara Desert. Well, back in November, a gospel preacher Barry baptized many years ago (and whose wife was taught by Barry's wife), they made an 1100-mile journey to a village where they knew someone who had been baptized last year in Togo. After hearing the good news, 23 people were ready to obey the gospel, but they had no water. The closest stream or pond was 50 miles away, and a vehicle only goes to that village once every week. So, on his next trip, the preacher brought a large tarp, they took it to the village well, they held the sides up, and they filled it with water. Among those who were baptized was an 80-year-old woman who rode 4-

½ miles on a donkey to get there. She said that she wouldn't live much longer and didn't have any time to waste. We share all of this by way of encouragement: What these people have done over the past few days, you can do this morning. If you have any questions or concerns, please get in touch.

This morning, we are beginning a series of lessons, looking at the messages sent by Jesus to the seven churches in Revelation. We've prepared for this over the past three weeks by looking at Jesus in Revelation 1. The book itself is the revelation of Jesus Christ. John is writing from the Roman prison colony on the Island of Patmos. As he is in the spirit on the Lord's Day, the curtain is pulled back, and he is able to see Jesus as he really is. He is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth, the Alpha and the Omega, the one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. And then we've also seen one of the only physical descriptions of Jesus anywhere in scripture. In the flesh, Jesus was unremarkable in his physical appearance, but as he is revealed to John, Jesus is awesome and terrifying. He appeared to be ***"one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength."*** And, of course, John falls at his feet like a dead man, but Jesus encourages John to write down what he sees. This is what John does.

And this brings us to Revelation 2 and the first message, directed to the church in Ephesus. Before we get to the text, let's remember that Ephesus was a large and significant city in the ancient world and had a population very roughly the size of Madison at 250,000 people. As you can see on the map, Ephesus was located on the sea, and the harbor made Ephesus an important port city at the time. We also know that Ephesus was home to the Temple of Artemis (or Diana), a massive structure, roughly four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens, and one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Worship of Artemis often involved prostitution.

In terms of Christianity, Paul seems to have passed through Ephesus briefly in Acts 18, as he leaves Priscilla and Aquilla there for a time. Paul then brings the gospel message to Ephesus in Acts 19. This is where he re-baptizes the twelve men. He continues teaching and is so successful in convincing people that there is only one true God, that the local silversmiths get together and cause a riot, upset that Paul is devastating their business of selling little idols of Artemis! This riot takes place in a theater. We still have the ruins of this theater today, and we estimate that it would have held roughly 25,000 people. By comparison, I believe the Kohl Center holds just over 17,000; so, this theater is larger than the Kohl Center. Paul spends three years in Ephesus, longer than he spends just about anywhere else.

In terms of scripture, some have suggested that we have perhaps eight New Testament books associated with Ephesus in some way. In other words, more scripture has been written to this city than any other. Obviously, we have the book of Ephesians, written by Paul to Ephesus at some point between 60-62 AD. 1-2 Timothy are written to Timothy, who was preaching in Ephesus at the time (at some point in the mid-60's AD). Then, some scholars believe that John wrote his gospel account as well as 1-2-3 John to the Christians in Ephesus. We have this message in Revelation 2. We also believe that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians FROM the city of Ephesus. And then tradition also tells us that John served as an elder at this congregation at some point toward the end of his life. So, the church in Ephesus has had every spiritual advantage – multiple inspired books written to it, as well as having Apollos, and Paul, and Timothy, and John, all spend some time preaching and teaching among them. And of all the churches in Revelation, we definitely know more about this congregation than any of the others.

I want us to realize, though, that this city is just about the farthest we can get from a “Christian city,” if there even is such a thing. They had no First Amendment protecting their freedom of religion. They didn’t have the right to vote. They had no real protection from the government. And, in fact, most people in Ephesus were hostile to the Christian faith. They persecuted the church. They hated Paul’s message. And yet, the church is established, and they seem to do quite well. I hope this is encouraging to us.

Before we get to the passage itself, I want to give our outline. This is what we are looking out for. And this will apply to most of our lessons over the next few weeks. We’ll give at least a bit of background information on the city, we’ll read the passage, and then we’ll see how Jesus describes himself, we’ll see a compliment, we’ll see a correction, we’ll see a command to be obeyed, and then we will close with a conditional promise. So, keeping this in mind, let’s look together this morning at Revelation 2:1-7,

***<sup>1</sup> To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: <sup>2</sup> “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; <sup>3</sup> and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. <sup>5</sup> Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. <sup>6</sup> Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.”***

- I. In keeping with our outline, we’ve already looked at the city itself, so now let’s look at the description of JESUS in this passage.

And I want us to notice that it goes back to something we saw in Chapter 1, as Jesus describes himself as, ***“The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand,”*** as ***“the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands.”*** Remember, in Revelation 1:20, Jesus comes right out and says that ***“the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”*** And the word translated here as ***“angels”*** simply means ***“messengers.”*** So, this could be a reference to angel-angels, the idea that each congregation has something of a guardian angel. But the other possibility is that these letters are addressed to the ***“messenger”*** of each congregation, a possible reference to the preacher. And I say this because the word John uses is actually a part of the word “evangelist.” We even see it in English – the word “angel” is in the word “evangelist.” The evangelist is a “messenger.” Specifically, he is a messenger who announces the good news. But whether this refers to an angel or some other kind of messenger, let’s notice that Jesus holds these messengers in his hand. Christ is in control here. The message they pass along to the congregation is valid only if it is faithfully and accurately communicated.

We also notice that Jesus is pictured as ***“walking among the seven golden lampstands.”*** The lampstands are the churches. Jesus, then, is pictured here as walking among and inspecting and encouraging and correcting his churches. He knows what is happening. He is observing. He is ***“with us,”*** as he promised he would be in the Great Commission, ***“I am with you always, even to the end of the age”*** (Matthew 28:20). And as he promised in Matthew 18:20, when he said, ***“For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”*** Christ is among us. He is aware of what we are doing as a congregation. He is walking among the

seven golden lampstands. I'm reminded of a style of management known as "Management By Walking Around." It's the informal practice of a leader taking some time to regularly walk around the office or the plant – observing, gathering feedback, sharing vision, taking complaints and suggestions, giving encouragement, and generally making him or herself available. And so, instead of the only contact being across a desk when something bad happens, the leader is always out there. In a way, this is almost what we see here. Jesus is among his churches. He hears the same sermons we do. He observes how we serve this community. He hears the prayers we offer. He sees how we care for each other. He listens in on each phone call made by our elders. He is with us as we rejoice, and he is with us when we weep over a loss. He is among us.

**II. And this leads us to the COMPLIMENT or the COMMENDATION – the good part of what he notices when he observes the congregation in Ephesus.**

He starts by saying, *"I know your deeds."* And again, this right here would hopefully be encouraging. I see you! And specifically, Jesus notices, first, their *"toil and perseverance."* To *"toil"* is to work to the point of exhaustion. To *"persevere"* is to bear up under pressure, to endure despite difficulty. So, the church in Ephesus was hard-working and diligent. As we might say today, these people did stuff! They practiced hospitality. They had a food pantry. They had a clothing give-away. They took care of the sick and the elderly. They assembled gift bags for the seniors. They dropped off lasagnas. They watched out for the fatherless and the widows. This is an active congregation.

But Jesus also says that they are a discerning congregation. They were intolerant of evil men. Just a note here: Jesus praises a church for being intolerant! That sounds so strange, but that's what the Lord says here. These people knew the truth, and they were extremely careful with what was taught both publicly and privately. They put people to the test. They quizzed people. Before anybody was allowed to teach, they had some questions. And Jesus praises them for this. In today's society, we don't usually think of intolerance as a virtue, and yet Jesus clearly says that it is, especially when it comes to what the church teaches. One author put it this way, "No heretical concept could ever raise its ugly head in Ephesus without being decapitated by the swift stroke of Biblical truth." I love that! These people are false-doctrine whackers! We will have none of that here! Truth matters.

It's separated a bit, but the other part of this comes down in verse 6, where we find that they hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which Jesus also hates. So again, hate seems to be a virtue here! Of course, we need to hate the right things, but Jesus hates, and the church in Ephesus hates, and Jesus compliments them for this. We don't have too much information here as to what the Nicolaitans were doing, but based on something that'll come later in this chapter (in the message to Pergamum), it seems to be tied to the teaching of Balaam, a teaching that would in some way encourage people to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of sexual sin. We'll have to leave it at that for now, but the point is: The church in Ephesus was intolerant of this, and Jesus praises them for it. If we had time, we could look at a number of passages addressed to Ephesus emphasizing this through the years. We have Paul's warning to the elders from Ephesus in Acts 20, warning them to be looking out for false teachers. We have similar warnings from Paul to Timothy (who was preaching in Ephesus) in 1-2 Timothy. We have similar warnings in John's letters (perhaps also written to Ephesus). Over and over again, we need to be cautious, and these people listened!

The other praise comes in verse 3, where we find that they also *"have perseverance and have endured for [His] name's sake, and have not grown weary."* These people are determined! Despite being persecuted and

harassed and hated, these people stuck with it. Jesus, then, starts with some pretty impressive compliments. I see what you are doing, and it's good!

But, Jesus doesn't leave it here, does he? Because he loves this congregation...

### III. ...he also offers some CRITICISM.

We might compare it to going to the doctor. If there's bad news, I want to know it. I need to know it. Don't gloss it over. Don't hide it in a pile of big words I can barely understand, but just tell me the truth. Tell it like it is. And that's what Jesus does here. The criticism comes in verse 4 as the Lord says, ***"But I have this against you, that you have left your first love."*** It's a devastating accusation. We might think in terms of marriage, and we might imagine one spouse saying to the other, "You don't love me anymore." That's huge, isn't it? And yet, that's about what's going on here, ***"You have left your first love."*** These people are busy, they are holding up under persecution, they have a reputation for weeding out false teachers, and these things are great, but they have left their first love. It's terrifying, isn't it? It's hard to imagine getting to this point, from all outward appearances to be a healthy congregation, but to be accused by Jesus of having left our first love.

At this point, there's discussion as to how we take this. Do they no longer love Jesus, or do they no longer love each other? And apparently, the language allows us to go either way. They've either lost the love they had at the beginning (in terms of loving each other) – ***"first,"*** in terms of time, or they've lost the most important love – ***"first,"*** in terms of importance. Ultimately, though, it seems that our love for Jesus and our love for each other are tied together, aren't they? Either way, this is bad. Either way, they are doing stuff, but there's an emptiness in their hearts. Perhaps they are doing the right things for the wrong reasons. Does this ever happen to us today?

We might think again to marriage. Imagine one spouse saying to the other, "I don't love you anymore, but I'll still live with you, and eat with you, and sleep with you, and we can still hang out together, and I'll still help with the bills. But I don't love you anymore." That's awful, isn't it! We can hardly imagine. And yet I'm assuming this was rather gradual. I doubt this church ever took a vote on this, "If you're in favor of not loving Jesus anymore, please raise your hand." This is not how this happens, but (as in a marriage) it happens gradually. Life happens, we get busy, interests change through the years, the two people drift apart very gradually, and there it is – the love is gone.

Well, what happens in a marriage might also happen with the Lord. We start strong, our sins are forgiven, we're motivated, we get to work, but over time, we lose that motivation. We might even continue doing what needs to be done – we still come to worship, we still teach a class (or whatever), but without the motivation from the heart, what was once a joy is now a heavy burden. Perhaps our interests have shifted. Maybe we're having a hard time letting go of a secret sin. And we drift. We're no longer praying like we once did. It's been years since we shed tears during the Lord's Supper. We're no longer reading the word of God every day. We've drifted. We're starting to think like the world. We laugh when the world laughs. And pretty soon we stop fighting back against sin, and we give in. Outwardly, we appear to be Christians, our name might be in the church directory, but there's nothing there. The love is gone. The fire has gone out.

A week or two ago, I tested a twig stove for camping. And it worked well. I boiled a container of water in just over ten minutes, using nothing but twigs – stuff you might find out on a hike somewhere. But the challenge was keeping it going. The fire had to constantly be fed, or it would go out. It needed attention. And what is true of a fire is also true of our Christian faith. Without that constant attention, the fire dies, and we tend to drift;

we leave our first love. Things might appear to be okay for a while, but it's all meaningless. We think of what Paul said about love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3,

***1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.***

That's what seems to be happening in Ephesus. Outwardly, things appear to be going pretty well, but without love, it's a whole lot of nothing. We don't want that. So, if there was ever a time in the past when we were more in love with Jesus than we are right now, let's pay attention. If there was ever a time in the past when we were more committed to the Lord than we are right now, let's pay attention. We might be in the process of leaving our first love, and this passage might have been written to us.

**IV. And this leads us to what comes next, as Jesus gives a COMMAND TO BE OBEYED. **\*\*PPT\*\*****

Can this be turned around? Obviously, Jesus thinks so, because he tells them what to do about it! The Christian faith is not some kind of perpetual motion machine. It needs to be pushed from time to time. And this is the push. The command has at least two parts to it, two steps.

First of all, ***"remember,"*** Jesus says, ***"Remember from where you have fallen."*** Think back to the way things used to be. Think back to when you first obeyed the gospel. Think back to the feeling of relief, that sins have been forgiven. I think of the video I mentioned last week, with the elderly man being baptized, and coming up out of the water in tears saying, "What a weight lifted!" Remember that, Jesus says. Think back to that feeling of relief in overcoming some terrible sin. Remember being able to sleep again without being worried you might die without being saved. Think back to what it was like to worship God in those early years. Remember what it was like to partake of the Lord's Supper the very first time. Remember telling your friends about Jesus. Think back to what it was like to pray in those early days. Remember how reading the Bible took on a whole new meaning back at the beginning. Think back to the cross. As we sometimes sing,

When my love to Christ grows weak  
When for deeper faith I seek  
Then in tho't I go to Thee  
Garden of Gethsemane!

The first step is to remember.

The second part of this is to ***"repent."*** To repent is to have a change of mind. To repent is to make a decision – a change of mind that results in a change of action. ***"Repent"*** was the first word announced by John the Baptist. It was the message Jesus told his disciples to preach, ***"Repent."*** And that's what Jesus says here, as he tells them to ***"...repent and do the deeds you did at first."*** Think back to what it was like back at the beginning and do that again! Remember what you did then and do it now. Get a new Bible, and read it every day. In the email we sent out last night with the church bulletin, we also included some good schedules for reading through the Bible. Use those. Get up early to pray. Sing like you mean it, even if you can't sing! Turn from sin. Praise God from the heart. Really think about what we are doing in the Lord's Supper.

In preparing today's lesson, I've probably seen more sermons on marriage than I've seen in years, because many people take this passage and apply it to marriage, and the lesson is: When you fall out of love with your spouse, remember what you did back at the beginning of your marriage, and do that again – go on date night once a week, bring home flowers, and so on. That's obviously not the main point of this passage, but that's what Jesus is saying about our Christian faith. Remember the way it was at the beginning, and do that again.

By the way, notice what Jesus does NOT say. He doesn't say, "Ease up on grilling the false teachers." He doesn't encourage them to be more tolerant. But instead, he praises them for their concern, and then he tells them to go back and to restore the love. In other words, you can do both. You can be concerned about the truth, and you can love Jesus at the same time.

How important is it for these people to repent and to restore their first love? Jesus says that if they don't, he will remove their lampstand out of its place. As I understand this, they will cease to exist as a congregation of the Lord's people. They might still be a church of some kind, they might still come together on a weekly basis, but Jesus won't be there with them anymore. They need to repent, or else.

**V. Thankfully, instead of a threat, each letter also ends with a PROMISE, and it almost comes in the form of an INVITATION.**

The Lord says, *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God."* We notice, first of all, how positive this is. He doesn't want to remove their lampstand. He wants them to repent. He wants them to go back to that love they had at the beginning. And so, he ends each letter with a message of hope, an invitation to hear, "If you have ears, this message is for you!" [paraphrased]. And the blessing is just as positive as the threat is negative. And so, instead of removing their lampstand, the promise is that's if they overcome, they will be given permission *"to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God."* If we overcome, we have a part in Paradise. And since this seems to be something of an invitation, the implication is: Not everybody will accept it. Jesus isn't forcing anything here, but he's pointing out strengths and then inviting us to do even better; otherwise, there are consequences, but if we overcome, we are invited back into God's Paradise. The word *"overcome,"* by the way, is that NIKE word again. It's the word for *"victory."* Those who *"overcome"* (those who NIKE) will be invited in. And so, instead of Adam being kicked out of the garden, we will be let back in, but only if we listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.

**Conclusion:**

As we come to the end of this message, I would also point out that the invitation is not just to the church in Ephesus, but this message is for the *"churches"* (plural). It's something of an open letter sent to multiple congregations, and each church gets to read the messages to the other congregations. And now, since we have this today, we are included here as well. The Spirit is speaking to us in this letter. As the Four Lakes congregation here in Madison, Wisconsin, on the first Lord's Day of 2021, if we do a good job weeding out false teachers, that's awesome. Keep up the good work, Jesus says. But on the other hand, if we have in any way left our first love, then we are invited to remember, and repent, and to do the deeds we did at the beginning. And this is why we pay attention to scripture here at this congregation. This is why we open the word of God each week. We are listening to *"what the Spirit says to the churches."* Next week, if the Lord wills, let's move up the coast a bit to Smyrna.

As we close, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God who holds your messengers in your hand. We are thankful for your providential care over us as a congregation over the past 25 years. And this morning, we are thankful for your message to the church in Ephesus and for the lessons we've learned. We are thankful for the reminder to always be faithful, to persevere under pressure, and to always test what we hear, comparing everything to your word. We are also thankful for the reminder to always put you first in our lives. We pray that we would never leave our first love. But we pray that we would remember, and if we ever drift, we ask for the strength and wisdom to return. Thank you for Christian friends who keep us focused.

As we begin this new year, we pray that we would put you first every day. Help us to live every day this year so that we can look back with no regrets.

We come to you this morning in the name of Jesus our Savior and King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)