

**SERIES: Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches**

**SERMON: *The Church that Had Everything Right Except the Main Thing***

**SCRIPTURE: Revelation 2:1-7**

**SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus**

**DATE: April 30, 2006**

We're going to begin a new series today from the book of Revelation. Yes, you heard me right, Revelation! But don't get too excited, because the portion of Revelation I want us to study for the next two months is not the part filled with strange prophecies and weird symbolism, but rather the part in chapters 2 and 3 where Jesus sends personal letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. These letters are extremely practical and meet us right at our point of need—both personally and as a church.

So, for the next seven weeks we are going to be reading someone else's mail. But just recently I learned about another letter from Jesus that has recently been discovered by archaeologists. This one probably won't get into *National Geographic*, like the ancient but heretical *Epistle of Judas* did, but I have ordered a copy of it, and I understand it is due to be delivered about the end of June. It is a letter addressed to the First Evangelical Free Church of Wichita—you won't want to miss that one. Thus the title of my series: "*Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches.*"

This morning most of our time will be devoted to the fascinating letter Jesus wrote to the Church at Ephesus, but I think it would be wise to spend a little time on the background and setting of the Revelation first.

### **Background and setting**

**The Book of Revelation.** Please turn with me to the first chapter of this amazing book, starting in verse 1:

*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw--that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*

*John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia:*

*Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

Skip down to verse 9.

*I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the*

*testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."*

Now verse 19:

*"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."*

Normally when one thinks of the Book of Revelation, what generally comes to mind are obscure prophecies, predictions of terrible tribulations, the Battle of Armageddon, the Return of Christ, the Final Judgment, and perhaps the New Jerusalem that comes down from heaven. But the opening chapters of Revelation are actually more historical than prophetic, more practical than obscure.

This book is clearly identified as a revelation from Jesus through his angel to John. There are several men named John in the NT, but this one is the Apostle known as “the one Jesus loved.” He wrote five books in the NT—this one, the Gospel of John, and the three epistles that bear his name, 1, 2, and 3 John. By the time he receives the Revelation (not plural, by the way; it is the book of the Revelation, not Revelations) he is very old, as more than 50 years, perhaps even 60, have passed since the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Tradition holds that John was the only apostle to die of old age, all the others having been martyred for their faith. But even he suffered significant persecution, as the Roman emperor exiled him to the Island of Patmos, a penal colony in the Aegean Sea along the coast of Turkey. Several years ago I had the privilege of visiting the Isle of Patmos and entering the cave where history tells us John was imprisoned and wrote this book.

John tells us he was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (that is, *about* Jesus). That is, he was banished there because of his faithfulness to Scripture and his insistence on preaching the truth of the Gospel to everyone who would listen. One Lord’s Day the aged Apostle was in the Spirit (probably a reference to a trance-like state), when a loud voice told him to write on a scroll what he saw and send it to seven churches. Jesus Himself gave him a commission to write “what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later.”

The difference between these time periods may be the key to understanding chapters 2 & 3, for there has been much debate as to whether these letters are historical or prophetic. Were they written to describe actual local, first-century churches in seven cities in Asia Minor, or were they written to describe successive periods of church history?<sup>i</sup>

Frankly, I see no reason not to take these as letters to seven actual local churches in seven actual cities. That doesn't mean, of course, that there is no application for future churches, for as a matter of fact, we can actually see ourselves (if we are willing to) in virtually every one of these letters. But we will consider their historical setting carefully before we draw modern-day applications. So in summary, I view "what you have seen" as a reference to the vision of chapter one, the "what is now" (from John's standpoint) as referring to the letters of chapters 2 & 3, while the "what will take place later" is a reference to the prophecies of chapters 4-22, which we will leave for another time.

All seven letters are addressed to an "angel." Your Bible probably has a footnote next to "angel" in Revelation 1:20, noting that the term can also be translated "messenger." Some scholars believe the letters are written to a leader in each church, but I see no reason to question the usual translation, "angel." The holy angels, you know, are very interested in what goes on in church. The Apostle Peter, for example, in 1 Peter 1:10-12 describes the salvation Christ has provided us, and then he comments, "Even angels long to look into these things." In fact, I believe angels are actually assigned to local churches as guardians, in much the same way as individual believers have guardian angels (and perhaps even nations have guardian angels, if I understand Daniel chapters 10 and 12 correctly).

**The letter to the church at Ephesus.** Now the first of the seven letters of Revelation was written to the angel of the church at Ephesus. I am calling this "The Church that Had Everything Right Except the Main Thing." Listen carefully as we read this short but powerful letter from 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 and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.*

*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."*

The church at Ephesus was established 15-20 years after the death and resurrection of Christ when the Apostle Paul visited the city on his way back to Jerusalem at the close of his second missionary journey. When he left, he put the ministry in the hands of a wonderful couple whom

he had led to Christ, Priscilla and Aquila, and they were later joined by the gifted preacher, Apollos. On his third missionary journey Paul returned to Ephesus and spent nearly three years there, the longest consecutive time he spent at any one church. He was eventually forced to leave because the silversmith's union started a riot. (The impact of the Gospel was destroying the market for silver shrines made in honor of the great goddess of the Ephesians, Artemis or Diana).

Paul continued to maintain a close relationship with the church at Ephesus. His farewell to the elders there, as recorded in Acts 20, is one of the most moving personal messages in the entire Bible, and later he wrote a letter to the church (we know it as the book of Ephesians) while he was in prison in Rome. He appointed his young protégée, Timothy, to be pastor of the church, and eventually the Apostle John arrived to begin a lengthy ministry there, cut short only by his exile to Patmos. About four decades have elapsed between Paul's first visit there and John's penning of these words.

The letter to the church at Ephesus opens with a clear identification of its author, and the author is not John. He may be writing the words, but Jesus is the author of them, for He is the one who holds the seven stars (the angels) in his hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands (the churches). The verbs indicate that He is both the Lord and the friend of the Church. That is, He is in charge but he is not an absentee landlord. He knows His churches well and is intimately involved with them.

### **Jesus commends the church at Ephesus for what it got right. (2,3)**

If there was ever a church that got off to a tremendous start and seemed to have it all together, it was the Church at Ephesus. Among the things Jesus praises them for are: good deeds, hard work, perseverance, intolerance of wicked people, discernment, and endurance.

**Good deeds.** In acknowledging their good deeds, Jesus shows that the believers in Ephesus are living out the fulfillment of the Apostle Paul's words written to this same church years earlier. Listen to Eph. 2:10: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." They are doing good works, and I am fairly sure they are not doing them in order to earn salvation, for you will recall the previous two verses in Eph. 2: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Their good deeds are the fruit of salvation, not the root of it.

**Hard work.** These are not Sunday morning Christians dabbling in their faith. They are working overtime to the point of exhaustion. You know something? There's nothing quite like the satisfying feeling of being worn out from a productive day of work, especially if that work is of eternal value.

**Perseverance.** The believers in Ephesus are under tremendous spiritual pressure, for theirs is a morally polluted city with all the worldly attractions one can imagine. The great

temple of Artemis or Diana in Ephesus, now in total ruins, was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was 425 feet long by 220 feet wide, the same square footage as two football fields. The statue of Artemis was believed to have fallen from heaven and was worshiped throughout Asia. But her temple was only one of dozens in the city, and every one of them was the site of degrading fertility worship via perverted sexual promiscuity. The religious, political, social, and moral pressure on the Christians in Ephesus is huge, but these believers are able to bear up courageously by the grace of God.

**Intolerance.** The fourth item Jesus praises them for is their intolerance. Though tolerance seems to be the one absolute virtue in American culture, it is never a virtue in God's eyes when it causes us to compromise our faith by toying with false religions. Well, the Ephesian Christians are not guilty of *that kind* of tolerance. While witchcraft, black magic, demonism, and pagan idolatry permeate their city, the believers refuse to tolerate such behavior. Thirty years earlier Paul wrote in his letter to this same church (Eph. 5:3-12),

*Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. . . . For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.*

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light . . . and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.*

The Church at Ephesus apparently has taken Paul's warnings seriously.

**Discernment** is the fifth commendation: "you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false." When Paul gave his farewell speech to the elders of the Ephesian church, he warned them:

*I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears (Acts 20:29-31).*

Clearly they are still obeying the exhortation many decades later.

**Endurance.** Finally, Jesus again mentions perseverance, but this time seems to have in mind the endurance of hardships for Christ's name. I suspect the Christians in Ephesus are often the butt of jokes and suffer severe persecution. Maybe some have been cast out by their families or lost their jobs because of their identification with Christ. But they have not lost their faith or their courage.

You know, when I read these commendations, I'm impressed. This is a very respectable congregation. I think I would be proud to be their pastor, and most of you would be pleased to be members. But unfortunately, that's not the end of the letter.

**Jesus corrects this church for one thing it got wrong: they had forsaken their first love. (4-6)**

Just one thing. Can't we just overlook one thing? After all, shouldn't we accentuate the positive? Jesus goes on to say through His Apostle, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." That's such a short sentence, seemingly insignificant against the many words of commendation. Yet when you stop to think about it, the church that had everything was missing the *main* thing—their first love. They had lost it, literally abandoned it.

Now it is not immediately clear what kind of love John is talking about here. Is it love for one another or is it love for Christ Himself? Regarding the former, this same Apostle John wrote a great deal about love among the family of believers. For example, in 1 John 3:11-18:

*This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. . . . We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. . . . This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

Could it be that the warmth and caring and willingness to do anything for anyone that characterized them early in the life of their church, had now grown cold? Maybe the theological battles they had fought against false teachers had created a certain level of suspicion or cynicism among them. You know, doctrinal purity and precision is sometimes accompanied by spiritual pride and arrogance, and a passion for truth sometimes comes at the sacrifice of relationships with old friends or close family.

Is that what Jesus is correcting this congregation for—losing their first love for one another? Perhaps, but I think it is critical for us to recognize that love for one another in the body of Christ cannot be separated from love for Christ Himself, because one is the proof of the other. In 1 John 4:19,20, this same Apostle writes, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."

So perhaps Christ is addressing both our love for one another and our love for Him. Yet I cannot help but think that his *primary* focus here must be on our love for Him. When he uses the phrase, "your first love," He seems to be speaking of more than a "chronological first", but also a "first in priority." And the love that has priority over all other loves is, of course, our love for Him. This church had apparently gotten so busy and involved in doing church, in doing good

things, in fighting good battles, that they ended up neglecting the Lord of the Church, no longer spending either quality or quantity time with Him.

A wealthy couple threw a party on the occasion of the christening of their first child. Many guests were invited to their beautiful home, and everyone was having a wonderful time celebrating the joyous occasion, when someone asked, “Where’s the baby?” Suddenly the mother bolted from the room and ran to the master bedroom. There in the middle of the king-size bed she found her baby, suffocated under the coats of the guests. Is that what happened in the Church at Ephesus? Was Jesus Himself suffocated under the busyness and good deeds of a Gospel-believing, Bible-teaching church? Could that happen to us?

Fortunately Jesus doesn’t correct the church without offering a solution, which comes in the form of three words: Remember, repent, and remove. “Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”

**Remember.** The prophet Isaiah told the people to remember the pit from which they were dug. It is easy to take our salvation for granted when we forget how lost we once were, and how quickly do we forget! Sometimes we need to go back in our minds to our days before Christ—not to revel in them but to marvel that God was gracious to save us from them.

But it’s also important to remember the height from which some of us have fallen. That is, we need to remember that camp experience as a teenager where we dedicated our life to serving Christ; to remember our earliest days as a follower of Christ, how excited we were to share our faith. We couldn’t get enough Bible study and we prayed about everything (even for lights to turn green); to remember how we eagerly attended church and Christian seminars and concerts; to remember how we gave freely and generously of our resources, not worrying about our retirement or long-term financial security.

However, remembering is only the first step, and it sets the stage for repentance.

**Repent.** Perhaps you are confused by Jesus’ use of that term, because no huge sin has been mentioned here. But friends, not all sin is sin of commission; some is sin of omission. In neglecting their first love, this church was omitting the most important thing. They needed to repent, which means to turn around. They need to return to the things they used to do. Return, He says, to the things you were doing when you were in love with Me. Let’s think of an analogy. It’s not an unusual thing for married people to fall out of love after a period of time. Married life can become hum-drum and ordinary, if we allow it to. The spark can be extinguished. Chances are they are not doing the things they were doing back when they were courting or during the early years of marriage.

Remember when you first fell hard for the one you married? You used to send little notes to each other. You used to snuggle and kiss for no reason. You talked freely about your hopes and dreams. You looked for reasons to call one another at work. Well, what’s the best hope of

returning to that former state of ecstasy, before your love grew cold and stale? Wouldn't it be to go back to some of those things you did when your love was a fire?

God will never force us to repent or return. He will, however, make the alternatives clear, as he does here: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and *remove* your lampstand from its place."

Or I will **remove** your lampstand. Your light will go out. Your church will no longer have an impact on its neighborhood or its world. And friends, Christ has removed many, many lampstands over the centuries. There is no church at Ephesus today, nor much of one in the modern city of Kushadesi nearby. The country of Turkey, where all seven of these churches were located, is more than 98% Muslim today, a Mecca of false religion and a vast spiritual desert. Europe, the home of the Reformation, is not far behind. And in our country entire denominations that once proclaimed the Gospel are today a collection of virtual mausoleums.

By the way, Jesus here makes a seventh commendation of the Church at Ephesus—separated from the others for some unknown reason. He says in verse 6, "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Unfortunately we know very little about this cult—either their origin or their teachings. Whatever they believed and lived, it evidently was very destructive to godliness and purity. The Church at Ephesus is commended for sharing Jesus' hatred of the practices of this group. It's encouraging that in His letter Jesus starts with encouragement and ends with encouragement.

**Jesus promises this church a bright future, *if* they overcome.**

Actually, that's not quite right. He promises something to *each individual believer* in the church. You will notice in verse 7 that the letter switches from plural to singular, from the corporate church to the individual Christian. John writes, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Salvation and sanctification don't belong to churches or denominations; they belong to individuals in those churches.

To overcome means to have victory over the obstacles that are standing in the way. In this particular situation the only obstacle mentioned is the loss of one's first love. I assume the Spirit is saying that the one who rekindles that first love, who overcomes the distance that time and temptation and apathy have created between him/her and the Savior, will be given the privilege of eating from the tree of life in paradise.<sup>ii</sup>

Some are tempted when reading a verse like this to immediately delve into heavy theological issues like eternal security and the perseverance of the saints, and to ask whether those who don't overcome are going to lose their salvation. I personally think this is the wrong question to ask. What is indisputable here is that the one who maintains or rekindles that first love for Christ is safe and secure and destined to enjoy nourishment and vitality with God in heaven.

**Conclusion:** As we close this morning, I want us to take some time for reflection and serious

self-examination. Think back and try to remember how things used to be in your walk with Him. Is Jesus Christ your first love today, all day and everyday? If the busy-ness and burdens of life or ministry have pulled you away from your “first love,” will you be honest enough to admit that right now? Come back, friends, to your first love and He will light a fire in you that will not die—a flame that will spread to your heart, your home, your workplace and the community at large. But it can’t happen if we don’t keep Jesus our first love.

It’s possible, of course, that you have never loved Him in the first place, because you have never really known Him. Will you repent and turn to Him? Jesus loved you enough to die for you and He offers the free gift of salvation to anyone who will receive Him as Lord and Savior.

---



---

i. Extensive efforts have been made to identify the issues raised in these letters with issues in the church through various periods of church history. Some have concluded that . . .

Ephesus represents the first-century church,  
 Smyrna, the period of Roman persecutions,  
 Pergamum, the age of Constantine,  
 Thyatira, the Middle Ages,  
 Sardis, the Reformation era,  
 Philadelphia, the modern missionary movement,  
 and Laodicea, the church of the last days before Christ’s return.

While some of these identifications are very interesting, I remain unpersuaded that these letters are primarily prophetic. The fact is, nearly everything said about all seven churches can be found in any period of church history if you look long and hard enough.

ii. The term “tree of life” is mentioned 11 times in three different books of the Bible. The first time is in Genesis 2:9 where we are told that God planted in the Garden of Eden the tree of life next to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After Adam and Eve sinned by eating from the second tree, they were banished from the tree of life, lest they live forever in their fallen state. The term is used four times in a figurative sense in the book of Proverbs. But in the book of Revelation, chapter 22, the reference seems to revert to a literal tree, or better a number of trees, in the New Jerusalem, bearing 12 crops of fruit, one each month, bringing healing to the nations. The righteous have full right to the nourishment of the tree of life.