

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **The Seven Churches of Revelation: Revelation 2:1-7 - Ephesus**

Any of us who have taken a driving test, or who have sat an examination, will appreciate what it's like to have one's work, or ability under scrutiny to see if it comes up to a set standard. We become very aware of a critical eye, that knows all the answers and how things should be done. This is exactly the setting of Revelation 2 and 3.

### **I know**

Few chapters in the Bible are more important than these chapters because they give us the estimation of the Lord Jesus of what He sees in the churches. The words, "I know" are repeated many times. There is nothing that the Lord Jesus does not know about, either in our individual lives, or in what is taking place in His church. There is a great deal in the profession of Christianity that is not real. Revelation 2 and 3 remind us that He knows and tests everything. This makes them a very solemn, yet vital, consideration indeed.

Before we proceed further we will read the letter to Ephesus. "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; 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: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. 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. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate. 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." (Revelation 2:1-7)

### **Labour and patience**

This first letter to the churches historically refers to the very earliest days of Christianity. Probably both the apostles John and Paul were still alive, and yet departure from the faith had already begun. When Paul wrote his last letter to Timothy he said, "All they which are in Asia be turned away from me". (2 Timothy 1:15) This would have included Ephesus. John, in his first epistle, could also write, "Even now are there many antichrists" 1 John 2:18. So the Lord Jesus is presented in the first chapter of the Revelation as a judge, one who is walking amidst the candlesticks. He is presented in this way because these letters deal with the responsibility of the church here on earth as bearing witness to Christ. He speaks in every case of what He can commend, but then of the failure of each one in their testimony of Himself. In this letter to Ephesus, He takes account of their labour and their patience. However, He does not speak, as Paul does in writing to the Thessalonians of their "Labour of love, and patience of hope in the Lord Jesus". (1 Thessalonians 3:13) This suggests that their labour may not have been done out of love for Christ, and that their patience was not in view of the coming of Christ.

To each of the churches, the Lord Jesus first of all presents Himself in one of the ways that John saw Him in Revelation 1. This is important as this sight of the Lord, if understood, will enable us to become overcomers. An overcomer is one who responds to Christ in any time of departure from the faith. So the One who speaks to Ephesus is Him who "holdeth the seven stars in His right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks". (Revelation 2:1) Stars would give us the idea of heavenly lights in a time of darkness, whereas golden candlesticks would speak of that which is according to God, but seen as bearing light here on earth. 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. But the fact that He walks in the midst of the candlesticks would remind us that He sees everything that we are doing, and evaluates the testimony we are giving.

### **First Love**

How sad, then, to consider that although there was so much that was good outwardly amongst these early Christians, yet He speaks of them as "fallen", because they had left their first love. This makes this letter to the Ephesian church one of the most solemn and searching parts of Scripture. It is especially so when we remember that the Apostle Paul

had laboured so much at Ephesus; his letter to them presents the supreme blessedness of the Christian's place as set in Christ in the presence of the Father, "holy and without blame before Him in love". (Ephesians 3:13) If the motive for anything that we do in our service is not firstly true love for the Lord Jesus, then it may count little in His estimation, even though it may appear worthwhile in the sight of others. There is another illustration of this in 1 Corinthians 13:3, where Paul says, "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing". He does not say that it will not accomplish anything, but that the reward would not be his. This emphasis on motive is also seen in the story of the widow's two mites in Luke 21:1-4. The Lord Jesus took account of how she cast into the treasury, not of how much she cast in, and said that she "had cast in more than they all" (Luke 21:3). It would have been perfectly reasonable humanly speaking to have kept one mite for herself to live on. But no, she gave both to the Lord and counted on Him in faith for tomorrow.

The value of what is done, or given, is according to the cost to the giver and the motive that prompted the act. If we lose "first love", the consequences may be very sad. "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" (Revelation 2:5). This may explain why so much service often produces so little.

First love is not that brightness of love for the Lord that we had when we were first converted. It is a love that involves going on everyday with the Lord Jesus, having Him firstly in view, and then His people. Then it will involve an outgoing love to those who do not as yet know the Lord Jesus as their Saviour. An illustration may be seen of this in John 13:34-5: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all know that ye are disciples of mine, if ye have love amongst yourselves." Affection for Christ is seen in those who keep His commandments. This produces love for those who are loved by the Lord Jesus, and is then a powerful testimony to all men. What havoc Satan has been allowed to cause by believers not showing love towards each other despite the Lord saying that this would be the greatest testimony to all men.

The word for "first" here is the same word as used in Luke 15:22 to describe the best robe that the father commanded to be put upon the returning son. That robe would have marked him out in that household as one who had a very special place in his father's heart. It was the best that the father had. In a similar way, ardent love for the Lord Jesus in every part of our lives will mark us out in this dark world as those who hold Him as being worthy of the best in our lives.

Paul spoke about "first love" to the Ephesians, in Ephesians 3:17-19, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God". It must have been beautiful to the Lord Jesus to be able to look down from heaven at a company of believers who were "holding the truth in love", and who were "growing up to Him in all things, who is the Head, the Christ: from whom the whole body, fitted together, and connected by every joint of supply, according to the working in its measure of each one part, works for itself the increase of the body to its self-building up in love". (Ephesians 4:15-16)

### **First Works**

Doing the first works, which accompanies repentance would show itself in one who is living in contact with Christ, the Head of the Church and is receiving guidance and direction to be able to help and encourage the Lord's people. It would have the effect of binding the saints together, and causing them to move together, thus reflecting the Lord Jesus in this world.

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 no longer would shine as a light in testimony for Him. It may be significant that not one of these seven churches remains today. In fact, the light of Christianity in that part of the world has almost vanished. This emphasises the solemnity of this warning for us, too, today.

### **The Nicolaitanes**

It may not be possible to say who the Nicolaitanes were, but the Lord Jesus hated their work. Their doctrine is spoken of in the letter to Pergamos, (Revelation 2:12-17), so it must be, that whatever their doctrine and work was, it had a very bad effect on believers. It is only by reading the word of God that we can know the things that God loves and approves. Likewise we shall understand what He hates. The Lord Jesus knew that there were those at Ephesus who in their hearts, hated the things that He hated. Many aspects of my life might be challenged if I consider whether I love the things that Jesus loves, and hate the things that He hates. This is where my faithfulness to Him will become apparent.

**An ear to hear**

In Revelation 2:7, He 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 qualifications, to know what the Holy Spirit is saying. It is open to every believer, if he is in that right condition of waiting upon the Lord in dependence, and being faithful to His word. It is only then that we can be overcomers. We all need to examine everything that is being done in the church today, to see if it is according to God's word. We need to examine our own lives to see if all is right there. If we find things that are not right, and judge those things, we will become overcomers. The Lord Jesus could never hold in His hand anything that is not according to Himself, nor support it with His power. If we simply asked the question, "Would the Lord Jesus have approved of this?" I think a good many things would change in our lives and in our churches.

**The Tree of Life**

There is always a reward to anyone who responds to Christ. "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:7) You may remember that the "Tree of Life" was in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8-3:24). Adam and Eve were cast out so that they could not eat of it. (Genesis 3:24) Sin had come in and destroyed life according to God; the fruit of that tree would have sustained them. But we read again of the tree of life in Revelation 22:1-2: "And 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".

Revelation 22:1-2 describe a scene where everything is of God and the Lamb, and is constantly maintained by the Holy Spirit of God. A scene where life is abundant, and death and the curse can never come. A scene where all the hurt that sin brought in will be healed, where men will serve God willingly and will be known by the name of their God, and where men will always be before His face. In the midst of such a scene is the tree of life. This tree in Scripture always speaks of the Lord Jesus Himself. He 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 when He administers the blessings of God. It will always be fresh and new. We cannot possibly imagine a place like this, but the Bible speaks of it, and the Lord Jesus is in the centre of it.

The overcomer has the blessing of this in his life now. He can now feed on the One who will sustain everything in this world for God's pleasure throughout the one thousand year reign of Christ. I believe this reign will soon begin. If we are feeding on the great Sustainer of life according to God, then I am quite sure that we shall be sustained for God in this world today.

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