

## EPHESUS

The Book of Revelation is the last book in the Bible. For some, that means it is actually the last word on all important things – in fact, the last word on last things: final instructions on where we are, what is going on, and what is expected of us. Others say it is the last book because it was the last one some people wanted in the Bible. The eastern wing of the church disliked Revelation, and the western wing of the church disliked Hebrews. It was, in part, a “political deal” that these two books made it into the New Testament canon at all – we will accept yours if you will allow ours. In the late fourth century A.D., Cyril of Jerusalem still omitted The Revelation from the canon and forbade its use in public or private.

Martin Luther included Revelation in *his* Bible, but he thought it was theologically challenged and did not preach or teach from it. Zwingli, the great Swiss reformer, pronounced it “no biblical book.” There are twenty-seven books in the New Testament; Calvin wrote commentaries on twenty-six of them. About Revelation he remained completely silent. To this day, Catholic and Protestant lectionaries rarely choose passages from Revelation; Greek Orthodox lectionaries *never* do. Some of you, in the next few weeks, are doubtless going to wish that I had taken a hint from my betters.

Nevertheless, I have come to love the Book of Revelation. In Greek, “revelation” is pronounced *apocalypse* (disclosure). In exile on the Island of Patmos toward the end of the first century, a man named John received visions – a revelation of what was going on in the “real world,” the world bigger and more lasting than the Roman Empire. He was instructed to write down what he saw and to share it with his fellow Christians in Asia – what we would call western Turkey. We suspect that John was an early bishop in that area. Whether you like the book or not, The Revelation helped to inspire the early church with incredible hope, courage, and commitment. Its imagery – for better, or for terrible – has become part of the Christian heritage, even for those who have never read the book. It is still part of our canon Scripture. I think you ought to know the book, at best for your own inspiration. If not that, at least so you can defend yourself against what is often proclaimed in its name.

The second and third chapters of Revelation contain cryptic messages to seven churches in Asia Minor. In the first chapter, John “sees” that the seven churches are Christ’s lamps in the world. (“*You are the light of the world.*”) Seven stars are angels representing that same light in the heavenly realms. The ancients believed that nothing existed on earth which did not have its heavenly counterpart. Anything taking place down here had to take place in Heaven first. (“As above, so below.”) So John is writing to the angels of the seven churches, and each message will infuse the church above and below. That does not mean they have to listen, but they will hear the message and decide what they will do. I thought you might like to hear the messages to the seven churches and see if you recognize anything pertinent or useful.

John reminds us that Christ holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven lamps. They have golden lampstands because they belong to the King. It is strange that we need to be reminded after all these years, but every time I come upon this passage, it awakens me with a start. Christ is in our midst – walking among us – and caring about what we are doing, thinking, saying, deciding. The lamps are supposed to be shedding the light of Christ in the world. If they go out, the light will get dim indeed. If we love the light, anywhere the light is shining in this world is a reason for rejoicing. But reading all seven letters to the churches, it is clear that some of them are not doing very well. Maybe the Lord assigned an incompetent or inexperienced angel to them. Wouldn’t it be nice if we had such an excuse to fall back on? If things aren’t going well, it must be because we drew a bad angel! If there’s anything I can’t stand, it’s an ineffective, inefficient angel. God should have a better training program for them ...

No such luck. The lamps are throwing light according to the faith of each congregation. There is no way to cheat. You cannot fake faith. Oh, you can pretend faith, and fool a few people for a while perhaps. But you cannot fool the light. If it is fueled by faith, it shines forth brightly. If the faith is pretense or is fading away, the light fades with it. John knows that there is a heavenly form and purpose – and a guiding spirit – for what each earthly church is supposed to be and become. There is an individual purpose and plan for each congregation, just like there is for each individual person. We may think *we* build churches, or help them to grow, or work to make them effective. But that is only the first-level awareness. It is true, but it is only a small part of the truth. Christ holds in His hand a design and purpose for each congregation. If we are faithful,

we move toward that design and purpose. When faithless, we move away from it. But the destiny and the task of the churches are not slipshod, accidental, or as dependent upon human whim and mood as they often appear to us. I like this book! It reminds me of many things.

So John's vision does not reduce our responsibility, but it adds a lot of hope. We do not have to worry about running out of vision or purpose – if we stay faithful. We do not have to justify our existence, only discover our identity. And all of God's churches are not supposed to "look alike." Each congregation has a special identity, its own shape and destiny, and its own part to play in Christ's larger plan.

One thing may still seem puzzling to some of us: Not a single time in any of the seven letters does John mention the size of the church, the number of its members, the condition of the church school, the popularity of the youth groups – not even the size of the budget. He does not say anything about office equipment, a fire-alarm system, or the condition of the building and grounds. I do not conclude from this that such things are unimportant. I *do* conclude from this that all such things are secondary – part of the support system for the real mission and purpose. God help us to keep checking our agendas, and not confuse the support systems for the primary purpose.

Christ holds the seven stars in His right hand. The right hand is the hand of action. It is John's way of saying that the church is "the body of Christ" – the action of Christ in the world. As Jacques Ellul has written: "[I]f Jesus Christ is indeed *the Lord* of history, it is by his Church in history that this Lordship must appear." (*Apocalypse*, page 126, emphasis added.) That is, by the way, one of the major themes of The Revelation. It is also why Christians end up joining a church. Only, there is a discrepancy, as we all know to our sorrow, between the idealized form (the stars) and the reality of human endeavor and response. The lamps do not give light as high and true as the stars. But a lamp is still better than the dark.

There really were seven churches in Asia, and of course there were a lot more than seven. John means seven real churches, but he also uses the seven to represent *all* the churches. Seven churches represent the *whole* church, and together they are part of the one true church. The seven churches represent Christ in action in the real world – to bring all of creation into spiritual awareness and LIFE.

The lamps represent the churches themselves. The imagery comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "*You are the light of the world .... Light a lamp and put it on a lampstand [not under a bucket] .... Let your light so shine before men that they will give glory to your father in Heaven.*" (Matthew 5:14-16) The churches are to glow with the light of the world (the presence of Christ), as the stars glow with the light of Heaven (God). John also reminds us that Christ walks among (in the midst of) the lamps. Never imagine, he says, that nobody knows or sees or cares what you are doing! What each church is doing – and how it is doing it – is of immense interest and concern to Christ. That is the message.

I do not very often argue with that concept consciously. I just have a hard time remembering it. In The Revelation, it is always the first word of Christ to each of the seven churches: "I know!" I know who you are. I know what is going on. I know how you are doing. I know you individually, and collectively. That is the message. I hope we can hear and remember it. Christ constantly walks among the lamps. His instructions are not guesses or stabs in the dark, or generalized theories from some armchair professor's textbook. "I know your deeds" – how it is going, what you are up against, how hard you try. How disconcerting. How reassuring!

Ephesus was the principal city in Asia. Population between two hundred fifty thousand and three hundred thousand. That's not Los Angeles, but it's not Podunk either, especially in the ancient world. Paul spent more time in Ephesus than in any other city of his missionary journeys. The temple of Diana (Artemis) in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Traveling to Rome from anywhere in the east, by sea or by land, the chances were you would go through Ephesus. The church in Ephesus was, and for generations would remain, the most influential church in all Asia. No surprise, then, that Ephesus heads the list of the seven churches.

From now on, the question is: Does the letter to the church at Ephesus have anything to say to our church here? It has been many years since John wrote The Revelation. The world has changed a lot. The letter is addressed to a specific historical church during the last decade of the first century A.D. But at the same time, John's imagery makes it clear that the letters are addressed to all churches through all time. That means we have to discern for ourselves what portions of the seven letters may still be the Spirit speaking to us. We cannot automatically assume either the commendation or the condemnation of the letters. It will have to be a matter of "If the shoe fits ..."

All the same, it must have been both interesting and exciting to receive a letter claiming to be an evaluation from the Lord Himself on how your church was doing. Of course, John did it so that all the churches got to read each other's evaluations as well as their own. It doubtless caused quite a stir – many late-night conversations within and between the members of all the Asian churches.

We do not have such an evaluation addressed specifically to our own church. But I suspect we can get in on as much of the excitement as we are willing to handle. As I said, I will leave the shoe-fitting part pretty much up to you. But maybe I can help in places where the handwriting has become a bit dim and hard to decipher.

Ephesus receives some rather high praise. It is a very hard-working church. Its members do a lot of good deeds. Not only that, they are persevering. They “hang in.” On top of that, they do not fool around with loose morals. They teach a high ethical code, and insist that the members of the church adhere to it. The Nicolaitans are “libertines.” We shall run into them again. The church at Ephesus is tolerating none of that. Moreover, the congregation at Ephesus is not an easy mark for every preacher and self-appointed apostle who comes into town. I suspect Paul had much to do with that. The Ephesians have learned to measure all teachers and teachings by the yardstick of the Gospel. They will not be drawn back into the legalism of Jewish Law, nor will they allow their Christian liberty to slide into pagan idolatry or the loose morals of the Greco-Roman world.

What more could anybody ask for? Ephesus is a church of good works, sound doctrine, and patient endurance. That is a pretty remarkable record. Would the Spirit give such commendation to our own church? Only, the letter does not end there. *“However, I have this against you: The love you felt at first you have now lost.”*

I have to run my eyes over that pretty fast if I do not want to start crying. How much of the travail, depression, and sorrow of this planet can be summed up in that phrase? *“The love you felt at first you have now lost.”* Never mind *our* church for the moment. How many churches dot the landscape from one ocean to the other, and inside are well-meaning people who try hard, work hard, and keep showing up, but there is something missing? The form and the vestments and the calendars and the meetings are all there, but it is boring, lackluster – more duty than joy, more habit than passion. The church is supposed to be the bride of Christ,

but, God knows, in too many places the church acts more like an old-  
maid aunt who never expects to see the bridal chamber.

*“The love you felt at first you have now lost.”* This could be said of how many families? How many companies? How many dreams and vows and vocations around the world? “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” (An old Quaker saying.) No matter how hard we try, how well-organized we get, or how disciplined our efforts and behavior, if we lose our passion – our personal love for Jesus – the lamp burns lower and lower. It does not matter how we *think* it ought to be, what the seminaries teach, how many books we read, how many substitutes we try. If our passionate, personal love for Jesus fades, the light of the lamp fades with it.

Do you remember the words of an old song – “Young love, first love, filled with true devotion”? (“Young Love” by Sonny James.) That is no longer true at Ephesus. And it means that something exceedingly important is missing. In fact, it is so important that if the Ephesians do not get it back, all of their hard work, sound doctrine, and patient endurance will be for nothing. The lamp will go dark and be removed. That is what Revelation says. Without love, all their faith and effort will be for naught. *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love ....”* Yes indeed! Years earlier, Paul had written these very words when he was ministering in Ephesus. (I Corinthians 13:1) Now Ephesus is a great church in the eyes of the world. But the Spirit *knows*, and the Spirit says to them: “Get back to the heart – back to the core – of the Gospel, or the rest cannot survive or mean anything.”

Is it love for God, love for Jesus, or love for each other that is lacking in Ephesus? Not much of a question. They inevitably go together. Even if one seems to come first, the others will always follow. And if one is lacking, the others will eventually leak away. Ephesus has one virtue that few churches can handle. The virtue is needed, perhaps, but this one is a bear. Few have it without being ruined by it. The Ephesian church does not like wicked people, they hate Nicolaitans, and they test all teachers for false doctrine. In short, they have turned into heresy hunters. Inevitably, they have become suspicious, judgmental, critical of others and of each other. When that happens, pretty soon everybody gets more and more careful and cautious about what they say. Then the contest begins and grows: Who *says it* right, and best? Who *does it* right, and best? Who works the hardest, does the most good deeds, is the most spiritual?

Jealousy grows. Duty and obligation take over. The glow, the ardor, the sheer gratitude toward God, the caring for one another – the first love – are out the door and down the road, or lost somewhere back in the past. Love cannot breathe (or breed) in such an atmosphere.

It is the classic problem of all institutions and organizations. It is also the classic problem of all relationships. It is fun to “fall in love,” or find a new friend, or start a new project or a new church, or discover a new interest or a new purpose or a new group. But the spark fades, the first love wanes, the honeymoon is over. Churches turn into organizations. Lovers turn into householders. Enthusiasm turns into obligation. Inspiration turns into duty. Love turns into “law” – a system, a structure, a technique. And people start feeling trapped, start looking for excuses, start talking about “falling out of love.” Or about being tired (or re-tired), or about having too many other things to do.

What can people do when the first love goes? Pretending does no good. But is it hopeless? Is it just “the way of the world” – the inevitable cycle of life on the planet earth? Obviously John does not think so – and the Spirit speaking to the churches does not think so. The letter carries a formula for just such a problem. Do we notice? It is one of the world’s best-kept secrets, yet it is not supposed to be a secret! It is proclaimed in many places, but here it is in the fifth verse of this cryptic note to the church at Ephesus. It works on any authentic love that is growing cold: REMEMBER – REPENT – DO.

Some of you can remember back to a time when you would have given just about anything for one night alone with your present spouse. At least I sure can. I hope *you* can. Can you also remember back to the first experience you had with Christ – back to your first personal miracle – back to when Christ’s presence stopped being just an idea and became part of your reality? Can you remember back to some of the early promises you made to God – back to some of the new vision you had of what life could be like – back to some of the pictures you had of what you wanted to be like and live like, and what you wanted to accomplish? If you found it, saw it, experienced it once, it is still there within you somewhere. Memory can take you back to those times and places. You can see it and feel it – and find it again – if you give memory the time and permission it needs to bring it back to consciousness. If the first love is gone or going, the first thing to do is REMEMBER. Where did the love come from at first?

What was it like then? Remembering gets us back to the awareness, and back to the source.

“Repent” means “to turn.” About-face. Go in a new direction. Once we remember the vision and love we once had, we turn toward it again. We cannot control everything, but we *do* decide which direction we will face. The second thing to do when the first love is gone or going is to REPENT. I am still amazed at how many people have a negative emotional reaction to the word “repent.” They “hear” or feel a lot of self-loathing. They do a lot of guilt-tripping. But repentance frees us from dead ends and wrong directions. Why do we not hear REFOCUS? Examine what you really care about, then reorder your priorities. If we turn back toward what first inspired us – if it was ever true and authentic in the first place – it will reinspire us, and often with a deeper and more profound enthusiasm than we ever had before. Do you love your wife as much today as you did the day you married her? If not, how sad. What a waste of time and life. All these years and you have not learned a thing. Sometimes truth, like a woman, will withdraw for a while just to see if we will come after it. And if we do, it is better, clearer, and stronger than ever.

Finally, DO! Do the things you did at first. First love is daring, risky, outlandish, often stupid – but seldom boring. It goes “all out.” I have known young lovers who would drive all night to spend two hours with their love, or risk bad grades in school or trouble with the boss to be with their love, or risk offending parents or friends to be with their love. And I have known some not-so-young lovers who would not turn off a television program to get a kiss, or put down a newspaper to give a compliment, or stop talking about problems long enough to express joy in being together on life’s strange and wondrous pilgrimage.

The same strange phenomenon can exist between the way we first loved Christ and the way we end up trying to serve Him years later. Doing things the way we used to, with the same exuberance and passion and abandon – without always caring about whether it will work out right or “succeed” or make us comfortable – also returns us to our former love. Love responds to *doing*. Who loves us most? Yes, and what does God in Christ *do* for us? Goes all the way to the Cross – all the way, all the time, no matter what it takes. Could there be a connection? Where does the fierce loyalty and caring of a mother’s love come from? Look at what she *does* for her child. Could there be a connection? What illustrations do you have of a strong and abiding love that “does” nothing? If you have a love

that is growing dim or cold and you want to bring it back, DO! Go into action. Do like you did at first.

When was the last time you took a chance – did a daring, risky, outlandish deed for Jesus Christ – just because you love Him and are full of the elation of His love and His Kingdom? If it has been more than a few weeks, the love is starting to grow cold. We do not have to do anything to *be* loved, but if we love and do nothing, how long can our side of the love survive? Love is incredibly powerful. It can endure almost anything – except neglect. Sometimes people come to me and tell me they have fallen out of love with somebody they once loved. People do not fall out of love; they starve it to death. They stop *doing*. (By the way, there *are* people caught in evil, and you have to stop showing your love to keep from spreading the damage. But that is a different problem. And you do not stop loving them. That is what makes it so heartbreaking.)

In any case, the Spirit is not content with the Ephesian church. “You hate what I hate,” the Spirit says, “but that is not good enough. Thanks for the effort, but my Kingdom cannot run on negative principles. You must return to the love we shared at first. You must love what I love – and love as I love. Hating what I hate doesn’t make it. Loving what I love is the only WAY that works.”

REMEMBER. REPENT. DO.

“If you do not,” says the Spirit, “I will remove the lamp altogether.” Ouch! Wow. Better to remove the lamp than to have a faith that works without love. Pretty crisp and harsh to say such a thing to the folk at Ephesus who are trying so hard.

The light bulb in our kitchen burned out the other day. It gave no more glow of light. It didn’t shine. It had been a *good* bulb. It lit our way for many a night. It didn’t break. It still had the same shape and form as always. It was still attached to the source of power. It just didn’t glow anymore. You know what I did? I removed it, threw it away, and replaced it with another bulb that gave forth light. I didn’t really mean to be unfair or unappreciative. But as Mariana said, “We needed the light.”