

Patmos and the Seven Churches of Asia

By Doug Hamilton

Opening Thought of the Seven Churches

In chapters 2 and 3, we find seven messages written to the seven churches of Asia. They all have the same general form or pattern. Jesus, the author, described Himself and proceeded to commend the Churches in the area or areas where there was merit. He would make a declaration of guilt for the purpose of improvement and included a promise to the souls who would overcome.



The Ancient Postal Route

One should take note of the order in which the Churches are mentioned. The seven cities mentioned in Revelation apparently formed an ancient postal route connected by Roman roads, stretching from the port city of Ephesus and all the way to Laodicea. If someone wanted to send a letter to this region, it would have traveled a particular ancient mail route, a Roman highway system of the day.

John would have sent the letter from the Island of Patmos nearly sixty miles to the port city of Ephesus. From there it would have been copied by the congregation and forwarded thirty-five miles north to Smyrna. They would have made a copy of the letter and sent the original another sixty-five miles north to Pergamum. From there it would make the 150-mile trip on the Asian turnpike toward the southeast, passing through Thyatira, then Sardis and finally arriving into Philadelphia. Heading back toward Ephesus there was a stop through the community of Laodicea. Historically it lines up perfectly with the order of the churches of Asia. In order of the scriptures, the first stop is Ephesus.

B) The Church in Ephesus: (2:1-7)

Revelation 2:1, "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..."

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The burial site of the Apostle John



The Ephesian Amphitheatre



Main street Ephesus

At the time it was the fourth largest city of the world with a population of nearly one half million. I claimed the title “*The first and greatest metropolis of Asia*”. When Paul arrived in Ephesus four decades prior, he saw the great potential. He spent three years here (Acts 20:31), the longest stop on any of his missionary journeys.

The remains of Ephesus are some of the most impressive in the archaeological world. For nearly a mile on both sides of the main road there are statues and temples to the many gods of the Roman world. You can find the library off Celsus, brothels, public bath houses, businesses and mansions. On the northern side of the city is the tomb of the Apostle John. Apparently after he was released from his exile in Patmos, he lived the remainder of his days in Ephesus.

This was also the center for Diana (Artemis) worship. People would come from all over the world to buy amulets and charms for childless couples, sickness and favor of the gods. This is why the local idol merchants were so upset in Acts 19:34, inciting a riot and crying out “Great is Diana of the Ephesians”, for many souls obeyed the gospel and dropped out of the idol buying scene.

The original temple of Diana crumbled years before, but the new temple to this Pagan goddess was in place at the time of the writing. It was so magnificent with its 2 1/2 million square foot area with 60 foot high pillars; it was one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. Three and a half centuries prior to the writing, Alexander the Great came and requested his name to be carved into one of the 120, seven-foot thick pillars. It was a shopping mall for all those who wanted to buy an Artemis idol. Everyone who was somebody was familiar with this temple, for it was the centerpiece of the community. It is for this reason that Paul wrote in *Ephesians 2:21*, “...in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord”. He was speaking their language. The Ephesians took their pagan worship seriously. Today all that remains of the ancient temple is a few pillars.

Jesus held the seven stars in his right hand and stands among the candlesticks. The word that is used for “held” is a powerful word, not meaning hanging on, but to completely hold within His hand. All seven churches are completely in the hand of Jesus, the life or death of these



Above: An artist rendering of the original Temple to Artemis

Below: What remains of the temple today



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churches resides with Him. This makes Christ the absolute authority for their survival. *John 10:28 and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand.*

Revelation 2:2-3. "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them {to be} false; ³ and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary."

Their toil refers not to just work, but bone tiring work. They were an active church family and had no time for evil men or false teachers. Less than four decades prior, Paul and Timothy were doing everything they could to keep these false teachers out of the Church (1 and 2 Timothy). Paul said in a departing meeting with the elders of the church at Ephesus in *Acts 20:29-30* "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; *30* and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." It appears they listened well and obeyed the exhortation. The Ephesian church endured and overcame the false teachers' attempts to upset the church and did not grow weary.

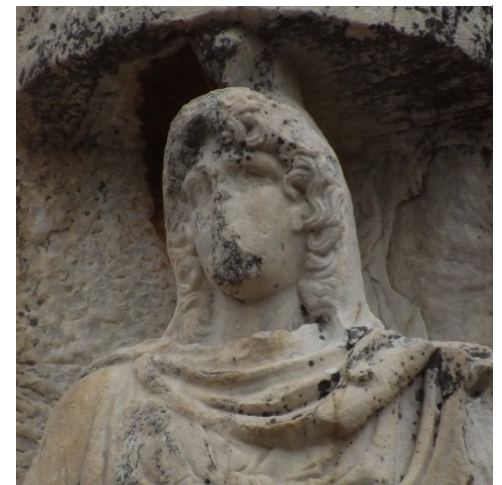
Notice the words "for my names sake" in verse 3. This will play a very important role in all the churches because at the time of the writing there was empirical law which required the citizens to publically call Caesar lord, hence denying Jesus as Lord. At the top of the hill near the entrance of Ephesus was a temple to Emperor Domitian. That would be the location when Christians were forced to make a decision for the names sake of Jesus. All they had to do was to throw a little incense into the fire of the altar and proclaim "Caesar is Lord" and it would go well for them in the city. They refused to do so because Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. They did not win any friends from the community in the process.

Jesus said in *Matthew 10:33*, "But everyone who denies Me before men, him will I deny before my Father." Paul eloquently phrased it in *2 Timothy 2:12-13*, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; ¹³ If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." God is serious about His Son's namesake in our lives.

2:4-5 "But I have {this} against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Remember therefore 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."



Above: The Temple of Domitian in Ephesus
Below: The face of Emperor Domitian's image



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Jesus had good news and bad news. The good news was that they had beaten back the false teachers. The bad news is that they have lost their first love. Some say that this means losing their enthusiasm, but cannot be true based on what was previously said of them. What appears to have occurred is the love they had for God and for one another had taken a backseat to aggressiveness against false teaching. This was exactly what Paul warned would occur if they were not careful. *1 Timothy 1:3-5*, “As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, ⁴ nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than {furthering} the administration of God which is by faith. ⁵ But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” In the process of overcoming the false teachers, trying to keep the church from “falling off the deep end”, they have become callous in their Christian attitude toward Christianity in general. They became spiritual Nazis. Instead stomping out false teaching and re-enforcing their love for one another, they became spiritual hit men.

Is it possible to be a church that loses its first love in the twenty-first century? In the pursuit of trying to wipe out the false teaching, is it possible to lose our first love that Christ centered in our lives? Could we ever be so right in the doctrine, yet lack complete love “out of pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned”? We know this is a common scene in many of the congregations of the Lord’s church and we must seek to stop it if it is the case.

Three-fold Strategy to Fix the Problem

- 1) **Remember:** The first step in returning to a proper position with God is to remember. We must remember the joy we had when our sins were washed away. We must remember that we are no better than any other person. We must remember the promise of fellowship with our fellow saint in Christ Remember the appreciation for God the times children were born? It is in the remembering that our minds are sparked to the need of return.
- 2) **Repent:** Once a man has remembered where he was and presently is, then the need to turn his heart back to God must occur. This is not a worldly sorrow of regret, but a godly sorrow that generates a change (2 Corinthians 7:11).
- 3) **Do:** All the heartfelt repentance in the world is no good unless it motivates one to a life-change in the end. What was remembered and repented of must have produced fruit by changing one’s actions.

Remember, repent and do, three instructions for the erring Christian in returning to the living God. If they do not remember, do not repent and do not do the first works, then Jesus will remove their candlestick. What does this say to us today in our congregation? The thought of Jesus blowing our candle out should strike terror in the heart of every Christian.

Revelation 2:6, “Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

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Who are these “Nicolaitans”? Some propose a Gnostic group of that day. Others say it was some Eastern Religious Cult of some kind. We do know that a few apostolic fathers (Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Clement of Alexander), shortly after the time of this writing, identified them as followers of Nicolas in Acts 6:5. Apparently Nicolas apostatized from Christ by teaching false doctrine concerning food and general life. Some believe this to include that it was okay to call Caesar Lord, as long as you thought Jesus was the real Lord. The divorcing of action from thought, a common agnostic belief of the day, was something that John addresses throughout the book of First John. If this is true, then obviously those who followed Nicolas’ teaching were not too well liked by Jesus. Is it possible that what we say and how we act and not only what we believe affect our salvation with Christ? The Bible seems to communicate this theme.

Rev 2:7 '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.'

He that has an ear to hear, hear what is being said. This is not just for the church at Ephesus, but also for all who will hear (remember verse 1:3). To the one that overcomes, God will let him partake of the tree of life. This tree of life is what all mankind has been trying to secure a bite of since Adam and Eve partook of the wrong tree (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) in the Garden of Eden. *Genesis 3:24, “So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life.”* It is also the same tree we see the overcoming saints partaking of at the end of the letter. *Rev 22:2 In the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve {kinds of} fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*

In Conclusion:

We must make sure that we never lose the “first love” factor in our Christian lives. At this time we are not being asked to bow down to a man and call him Lord, but instead are dying a death of a thousand cuts. We have the media, the universities, the business world and a thousand other forces trying to rob us of our “first love” of Christ. We must remind others in the church and be reminded ourselves to repent and live the way God has called for us to do.