

Ephesus: The Loveless Church

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

Forgot the Most Important Thing: Imagine a groom who is doing everything to make his wedding day perfect. He's meticulous—he books the best venue, hires an expensive photographer, and even memorizes his vows (instead of winging it, reading it, or repeating it #swoon). He double-checks the seating chart and makes sure the DJ has the right playlist. He spit shines his shoes, polishes his cuff links, and triple checks his boutonniere. The guests arrive. The music starts. He's standing at the altar looking sharp, smiling confidently—until the officiant whispers, “Hey...where's your bride?” And suddenly, it hits him. HE. FORGOT. TO. PICK. UP. HIS. BRIDE. The most important thing he forgot. He did a lot of **good** things but forgot the **essential** thing.

Tribulation and Endurance:¹ At the beginning of Revelation, John includes seven messages, seven **letters**, to seven churches in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). These are letters to a church in **tribulation**,² a church experiencing cultural hostility, external persecution, and spiritual opposition.³

- God sends this vision to his church through John to remind them of his sovereign power and encourage them to endure to the end.
- In God's grace, suffering is an opportunity to test and refine our faith. It can clarify whether those who **profess** salvation actually **possess** salvation. How do we suffer well? Where is my hope? Where is my joy?

Ephesus:

- **Cultural Center:** Ephesus was a strategic and influential port city. It was home to the famous Temple of Artemis⁴ (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World) and one of the most famous temples of antiquity. It was a cosmopolitan center for commerce, religion, and culture and a challenging place for Christians to maintain their witness amid pagan worship, political pressure, and rampant immorality.
- **Ecclesial Center:** “It would be hard to understand the NT without understanding Ephesus.”
 - Ephesus was one of the most important churches in **Paul's** ministry. He spent **three years** there, longer than he stayed in any other city during his missionary journeys (that we have record of).⁵ Some scholars suggest that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus.⁶ We know he wrote 1 and 2 Timothy to his son in the faith, who was in Ephesus serving the church. His emotional farewell to the

¹ Context and purpose.

² Rev 1:9

³ Rev 12 describes the woman (i.e., the church) as being led into the wilderness (*a la* Jesus in Matt 4, Mk 4, Lk 4) and being sustained by God (Rev 12:6) as Satan pursues her.

⁴ Greek goddess of hunting, fertility, and childbirth.

⁵ Acts 20:31

⁶ If true, he would might have written Philippians, Philemon, and possibly 1 Corinthians from an Ephesian Jail. Cf. Phil 1:7, 13; Philem 22; 1 Cor 15:32, 16:8; 2 Cor 1:8-9

elders in Ephesus⁷ showed how beloved and special the Ephesian church was to him.

- Tradition⁸ has it that the Apostle John wrote his Gospel and his three letters from Ephesus in his later years.⁹
- In that faithful church in that influential city, God built a strong, vibrant, diverse, missionary community of Jews and Gentiles.
- It makes sense that the **first letter** is to such a prominent church.

Thus Says the Lord: ¹“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The¹⁰ words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

- We’ve already seen (Rev 1:9-20) the **divine identity** and **sovereign power** of Jesus as the one who literally holds the **seven stars¹¹** in his hand (**stars=angels; lampstands=churches**). He is among and over his churches, directing and guiding them. We can rest in his care and follow him with confidence, knowing he is in control even in the midst of trials.
- Jesus himself, addresses the **angel of the church in Ephesus**, this heavenly being that represents the local church.¹²
- These words of Jesus are a “thus says the Lord.” Like the oracles of the OT prophets, Jesus is offering a prophetic and pastoral message that we need to hear as much as the Ephesians do.¹³
 - This is not just to Ephesians but to “all the churches” (there are more than seven churches, the seven symbolize the fullness of all churches).

Lampstand: Each church is a lampstand. Just like the lampstand in the OT tabernacle illuminates the dwelling place of God, “**churches are to receive the light of God’s presence in Christ and reflect it to the world**” (Schreiner).

- As Jesus says, “**You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven**” (Matt 5:14-16).
- As the church, we are meant to be “**children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world**” (Phil 2:15).

⁷ Acts 20:17-38

⁸ John > Polycarp > Irenaeus

⁹ Irenaeus (c. 130–202 AD) states that John wrote his Gospel while living in Ephesus: “John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.” (Against Heresies, 3.1.1). Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215 AD) affirms John’s ministry in Ephesus and his writings to combat false teachings. Eusebius (c. 260–339 AD) cites earlier sources indicating that John taught and wrote in Ephesus before being exiled to Patmos, where he wrote Revelation (Ecclesiastical History, 3.23.1-3).

¹⁰ Τάδε = used in archaically stylized formal introductions to prophetic or imperial pronouncements (i.e., “Thus says...”)

¹¹ Rev 1:20

¹² The identity of the angel in Revelation 2:1 is debated. Some understand it as a heavenly being (Beale, Schreiner, Origen), possibly a divine representative or guardian over the church. Others see it as a corporate representation of the church, reflecting its already heavenly identity. Another view is that the angel refers to human leaders or representatives of the church, maybe even a pastor (MacArthur, Epiphanius, Augustine, Lorrits).

¹³ HT Beal “prophetic message”

- The purpose of the church is to possess the presence of God and shine it into the world. We are called to be a faithful, illuminating witness of Christ. You are put here for a reason, to shine for Christ,.

Faithfulness without love is failure. Jesus calls His church not just to right doctrine and good works, but to a vibrant love for Him that fuels everything we do. If we lose our first love, we risk losing our light.

- **1. The Good: Enduring Faithfulness (vv. 2-3, 6)**
- **2. The Bad: Loveless Devotion (v. 4)**
- **3. The Opportunity: Remember, Repent, Return (vv. 5, 7)**

^{2:1} “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. ² “ ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’¹⁴

1. The Good: Enduring Faithfulness (vv. 2-3, 6)

² “ ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary... ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He Knows: I know your works Jesus is walking among his churches, he knows what’s going on. He is “walk[ing] among” the churches.¹⁵

- Jesus knows, there’s no need to try and fool him (like playing hide and seek with a toddler). You might be fooling me. You might be fooling others. You might even be fooling yourself! But you’re not fooling God.

¹⁴ ^{2:1} Τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Ἐφεσῷ ἐκκλησίας γράψων· Τάδε λέγει ὁ κρατῶν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ, ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἑπτὰ λυχνιῶν τῶν χρυσῶν· ² Οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου καὶ τὸν κόπον καὶ τὴν ὑπομονὴν σου καὶ ὅτι οὐ δύνη βαστάσαι κακοὺς, καὶ ἐπείρασας τοὺς λέγοντας ἑαυτοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν καὶ εὗρες αὐτοὺς ψευδεῖς, ³ καὶ ὑπομονὴν ἔχεις καὶ ἐβάστασας διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου καὶ οὐ κεκοπίσθης. ⁴ Ἄλλα ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὅτι τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφήκεις. ⁵ μνημόνευε οὖν πόθεν πέπτωκας καὶ μετανόησον καὶ τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποιήσον· εἰ δὲ μή, ἔρχομαί σοι καὶ κινήσω τὴν λυχνίαν σου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς, ἐὰν μὴ μετανόησῃς. ⁶ Ἄλλα τοῦτο ἔχεις, ὅτι μισεῖς τὰ ἔργα τῶν Νικολαϊτῶν ἃ καγὼ μισῶ. ⁷ ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. τῷ νικῶντι δώσω αὐτῷ φαγεῖν ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ.

¹⁵ Rev 2:1

Commendation: Jesus begins with commendation—recognizing the Ephesian church for their hard work, endurance, and doctrinal faithfulness. These are good things, but as we will see, they are not enough on their own.

- **(1) Faithful in Hard Work:** your toil The word “toil” means to labor to the point of exhaustion.¹⁶
 - Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your **labor** is not in vain (1 Cor 15:58).
 - It is good to work hard for the Lord! Rest is important (i.e., Sabbath). **(a)** Work without rest is a recipe for self-reliant burnout. That why Jesus says, “Come to me, all who **labor**¹⁷ and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). **(b)** But always remember that God worked six days and rested one. Work without rest is laziness, which is also a sin!¹⁸ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I **worked** harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me (1 Cor 15:10).
 - There is an essential caution against a hurried life and the need for contemplation that can only happen with a slower pace. But for some of us, we need a more active life. Some have mastered rest and ignored work!
- **(2) Faithful in Endurance:** your patient endurance¹⁹ This church was steadfast under trial, remaining firm in the face of pressure, suffering, and persecution. They’re not going to give up.
 - ² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces **steadfastness**. ⁴ And let **steadfastness** have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (Jas 1:2-4)
 - ³ But we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces **endurance**, ⁴ and **endurance** produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:3-5).
 - Don’t give up (e.g., PhD and church planting strategy, “too dumb to quit”).
 - When the journey gets hard, too many of us quit even though Paul told us that it is “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).
 - “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal 6:9)
- **(3) Faithful in Doctrine:** and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary... ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
 - They did what Paul told them. They protected the flock from false teachers.²⁰

¹⁶ κόπος (n)

¹⁷ κοπιᾶω (v)

¹⁸ Prov 6:9-11, 10:4, 13:4; Eccl 10:18; Matt 25:26; Rom 12:11; 2 Thess 3:10-12; Col 3:23

¹⁹ ὑπομονήν (lit. “remain under”)

²⁰ Acts 20:30

- They tested the false prophets and false apostles.²¹ “False teachers, false prophets, and false apostles were a common problem in the churches. Jesus warns about ‘false christs’ and ‘false prophets’” (Schreiner).²²
- How do we detect false teachers? We look at their doctrine and their behavior. False doctrine and evil behavior go hand in hand.
 - This isn’t just an esoteric exercise in theological speculation but a real-world problem as there are actual doctrinal errors being promoted in this church (e.g., Nicolaitans). Some believe the Nicolaitans were telling the church they could participate in the idolatrous practices of Ephesus without consequence.²³
 - Commerce and livelihoods were tied to the Temple of Artemis. Many jobs and business connections required participation in idolatry.
 - How else would you fit in? Refusing to worship the emperor or engage in cultural idolatry led to social and economic isolation.
 - Where are you tempted to compromise to fit in?
 - Are you silent about your faith at work to avoid tension?
 - Do you avoid biblical truth so people don’t think you’re intolerant or outdated?
 - Do you justify ungodly behavior because “everyone else is doing it?”

Baby and Bathwater: Are these positive things? Yes. Don’t stop doing them! Don’t get rid of the positive because of the negative. The solution isn’t to abandon truth for the sake of love, nor to sacrifice love for the sake of truth.

- What we need to do is get it in the right order.

Jesus acknowledges their hard work, but it had become duty without devotion. They were a hardworking church with a weary heart. They had a loveless devotion.

2. The Bad: Loveless Devotion (v. 4)

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

First Love: They had “moved away from the love they showed at the beginning of their Christian experience” (Schreiner)

- The natural tendency of all love is to drift or, as Jesus said, to grow cold.²⁴
- When you first come to Christ,²⁵ you are bold, enamored, and overwhelmed. You can’t get enough of your Bible. You can’t pray too much. You share the gospel with everyone. Scripture memory. Worship music. Joyful obedience. Gather with the saints. Hate sin. Love holiness.

²¹ 1 Jn 4:1

²² Matt 24:24

²³ Beale

²⁴ Matt 24:12

²⁵ Your first love: τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην (not primary love but temporal love, i.e., the love you had at the beginning of the Christian life).

- Familiarity may not breed contempt but it often breeds apathy. It dulls our admiration. It mutes our awe.²⁶
- Going through the motions. The heartbeat is gone. The fervor, passion, and zeal have faded. This is a danger in everything from marriage to ministry. Even a vacation: You get used to the beach! You take for granted the sunset. You forget what once amazed you. You no longer see what captivated you. You lose the joy of what was once extraordinary.

Ministry: When you lose your first love, when the passion is gone, obedience becomes obligation, service becomes duty, and worship becomes routine.

- Doing things for God can't take the place of being with God. You can give all the money, go on all the mission trips, share the gospel with everyone, and not love Jesus.
- "The scary thing about ministry is you can learn to do it." And we've all been there or will be there. The danger isn't just burnout; it's drifting—slowly replacing intimacy with activity, passion with performance, and love with labor.
- I love preaching! Do I love preaching more than I love Jesus?
- Cf. Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42). Martha was doing good and important work serving Jesus but Mary was doing what was essential — sitting at Jesus' feet. Jesus tells her: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:41-42).
- It is dangerously easy to exchange the essential devotion to Jesus for the good things of ministry.

What is the Love?: Scholars debate whether the "first love" refers to: (1) love for Christ, (2) love for other Christians,²⁷ (3) love for witnessing to the world.²⁸

- Ultimately, all of these are connected. If you do not love God, you cannot love others. If you do not love others, you are not loving God. If you do not shine the light of Christ, you don't truly love the lost world.

Where is the Love?: All the hard work, doctrinal rigor, and steadfast endurance don't matter at all without love.²⁹ Having everything without the main thing is just going through the motions. And I didn't sign up just to "fake" a relationship with Jesus.

- Those things are not unimportant! But there is a spiritual order of operations (e.g., math, if you get the numbers right but the sequence wrong, you get the wrong answer).³⁰
- "It is a good thing to possess an accurate theology, but it is unsatisfactory unless that good theology also possesses us" (C. L. Mitton). Cf. theology = map vs. trip.
- Knowing the right catechism, the right podcast, and the right book can never replace knowing and loving Jesus.

²⁶ Cf Aesop, Hazlett

²⁷ Schreiner

²⁸ Beale

²⁹ The same is also true of prophecy, knowledge, and spiritual gifts (cf. 1 Cor 12-14).

³⁰ HT Bryan Lorritts

- Perfecting doctrine without cultivating love is like polishing the lamp when the fire has burned out. It doesn't matter how sparkly your lampstand is if there is no fuel to sustain the fire. **The fire is more important than the fixture.**

If there is no love for Christ, there will be no light of Christ.

3. The Opportunity: Remember, Repent, Return (vv. 5, 7)

⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent... ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

Potential Punishment: I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. The consequence is dire. A church³¹ that loses its love will cease to be a church. God will take their light. They will no longer be a functioning lampstand.

- There are countless communities and buildings with "church" on the sign that no longer possess the light of Christ.
 - We could spend our time looking at other churches, pointing out all of their deficiencies and flaws, while ignoring our own. It is quite easy (and necessary) to point out the dangers "out there," but we must be aware of the greater danger "within."
 - We are always in danger of letting our love for Christ fade and fail, even as we pursue so many good things in the name of Christ.
 - God is warning *us* as a church to cultivate our love.
 - God guarantees to build his church,³² not necessarily through this local expression of it. Every church has a start and end date unless God returns. **All the churches that got NT book deals are gone!**

Opportunity: If we have an ear to hear.³³

- This warning is only as good as our willingness to **hear and heed** (e.g., taking the battery out of the smoke detector; ignoring the check engine light, etc.).
- It is impossible to change if you won't admit you're wrong. Too often "we see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear."
- God opening your eyes to see your sin is a great gift: don't waste it.

Jesus' words to the Ephesian church aren't **ancient history**—they are a mirror for us today. The danger of drifting is real. We can be faithful in service, steadfast in doctrine, tireless in endurance... and still miss what matters most.

- Examine your heart: **What do you love? Has your love for Christ grown deeper—or has it faded into routine?**

³¹ Second person plural

³² Matt 16:18

³³ Cf. Matt 13:9-17; Mark 4:9, 23; Lk 8:8; Is 6:9-10; Ezek 3:27, etc.

- What do you want? Do you desire His presence more than the approval of others, more than success, more than comfort?
- What are you working for? Are you doing ministry for Him or just for the sake of doing ministry?
- Where do you find refuge? When life gets hard, do you run to Him—or to distractions, to work, to entertainment, to anything but Jesus?

Remedy: There is **hope**. This isn't just a **warning**—it's an **invitation**. Jesus doesn't just point out what is missing; He shows the way back.

- **(1) Remember:** ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen. The way back starts with remembering. Remember when God captivated your heart. Remember when you professed your faith in public baptism. Think back to when you first fell in love with Jesus. Stop, reflect, and let that stir you again.
 - Remember when reading the Bible wasn't an obligation but a delight.
 - Remember when weekly worship wasn't an inconvenience but a joy.
 - Remember when nothing could stop you from sharing your faith.
 - Remember when you didn't make excuses for sin but joyfully fought against it.
- **(2) Repent:** repent. Turn from the sin of apathy, familiarity, and complacency. Acknowledge where you've drifted. Name the things that have taken first place over Jesus. Turn from *them* and turn to *him*.
- **(3) Return:** do the works you did at first. One way to lead your affections is to act in faith before you feel faithful. Don't wait until you feel like loving Jesus—go ahead and love him.
 - Seek Him in His Word, even when you don't feel like it.
 - Cry out in desperate prayer, even when it feels dry.
 - Worship like He is your greatest treasure, even when your heart is dull.
 - Love like you've been loved, even when it doesn't come naturally.
 - Notice how God will use those moments to fill your heart with the love you desire.
 - Fires don't start themselves. Someone gathers wood, strikes a match, etc. Don't sit around waiting for passion to reignite—feed the fire through obedience, worship, and the pursuit of Christ. The warmth will come.

Will you rekindle the fire and return to your first love or settle for cold devotion?