

## *Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation*

### **II. THE THINGS WHICH ARE. (2:1-3:22)**

#### **The Messages to the Seven Churches**

##### **The Introduction:**

It is here where Christ commanded John directly to record the 7 messages to the 7 churches of Asia Minor, listed in 1:11. These messages make up the content of Chapters 2 & 3, The Things Which Are.

Remember what we have covered before:

- John had a heart for these 7 churches, because he had been the elder at the church in Ephesus and therefore ministered to the entire region.
- These 7 churches were centers of 7 postal districts in Asia Minor which would help in publicizing the Revelation from Christ.
- The order of the 7 churches represent the circular route taken to deliver the book.
- The various spiritual situations of the 7 churches represent the various spiritual situations that exist in the church as a whole. They do not represent 7 periods of church history. It is impossible to completely harmonize these with the history of the church. This was not the original understanding when Revelation was written. No two scholars who hold this view agree on the dates for each period. There exists no Biblical support for this interpretation.

Each of these messages follow a basic outline:

- The Commission to the *Church*.
- A Description of the *Christ*.
- A *Commendation* given to each. (Except Laodicea)
- A *Condemnation* given to each. (Except Smyrna & Philadelphia)
- *Counsel* (instruction) is given to each.
- A *Challenge* is given to the Overcomers in each church.

"Christ promises to those who overcome form a common thread that runs through the challenge of these seven letters. They provide a bright spot, even in the dimmest letters written to Sardis and Laodicea. An overcomer experiences victory over sin, Satan and the world. John already defined an overcomer in his first epistle: 'For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith. And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God' (1 John 5:4-5)." <sup>68</sup>

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### **The Message to the Church in Ephesus: (2:1-7)**

#### *The Commission to Write to the Church in Ephesus:*

##### The City of Ephesus:

Ephesus was one of the oldest, largest and most important cities in Asia Minor. "Ephesus, modern day Seleuk Turkey, shared supreme economic importance in the Middle East with Antioch and Alexandria."<sup>69</sup>

Its population has been estimated between 250,000 to 500,000 people. "It was the crossroads of civilization in that day, noted for its great library, as well as its opulence and wealth."<sup>70</sup> "Ephesus was strategically located at the junction of four of the most important Roman roads in Asia Minor. Strabo a geographer from the time of Christ called it the market of Asia."<sup>71</sup> "Politically, it was a free city and was home to the Roman governor of the province."<sup>72</sup> "Ephesus was the primary harbor in the province of Asia. The city was located on the Cayster River, about three miles upriver from where it flowed into the sea. Those disembarking at the harbor traveled along a magnificent, wide, column-lined road (The Arcadian Way) that led to the center of the city. In John's day silt deposited by the Cayster River was slowly filling up the harbor, forcing the city to fight to keep a channel open. That battle would ultimately be lost, and today the ruins of Ephesus are located some six miles inland from the sea."<sup>73</sup> "Religiously, the Ephesians worshiped Diana, the goddess of the woodlands and fertility (Greek, Artemis). The temple of Diana was one of the wonders of the world, dating back to the sixth century B. C., and religious prostitution and orgies flourished there."<sup>74</sup> "The temple served as one of the most important banks in the Mediterranean world. The temple and its environs also provided sanctuary for criminals."<sup>75</sup> "The temple area possessed the right of asylum. Any criminal who committed a crime and could reach the temple before being apprehended was safe."<sup>76</sup> "The temple of Artemis was unspeakably vile. Her idol was a gross, many-breasted monstrosity, popularly believed to have fallen from heaven (Acts 19:35). The temple was attended by numerous priests, eunuchs, and slaves. Thousands of priestesses, who were little more than ritual prostitutes, played a major role in the worship of Artemis. The temple grounds were a chaotic cacophony of priests, prostitutes, bankers, criminals, musicians, dancers, and frenzied, hysterical worshippers. The philosopher Heraclitus was called the weeping philosopher because no one, he declared, could live in Ephesus and not weep over its immorality."<sup>77</sup>

##### The Church in Ephesus:

"Perhaps no church in history had as rich a heritage as the congregation at Ephesus. The Gospel was introduced to that city by Paul's close friends and partners in ministry, Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:18-19). They were soon joined by the eloquent preacher and powerful debater Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos laid the ground work for Paul's ministry in Ephesus."<sup>78</sup> "Paul first visited Ephesus close to the end of his second missionary journey as described in Acts 18:19-21). It was on his third missionary journey, when he founded the Ephesian church and spent three years there ministering to the surrounding region (Acts 19-20). "Paul wrote an important New Testament letter to the Ephesian believers emphasizing the character and conduct of the church."<sup>79</sup> According to 1 Timothy 1:3, Paul's protégé Timothy served as pastor of the church in Ephesus. According to early church history as mentioned earlier, The Apostle John served as elder of the Ephesian church prior to his arrest and imprisonment on Patmos. The church in Ephesus had

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a rich 40 year history being instructed and influenced by teachers such as Aquilla, Priscilla, Apollos, Paul, Timothy, and John.

### *The Picture of Christ to the Church in Ephesus:*

The One who holds the seven stars:

The imagery here is drawn off from the Vision of Christ in 1:12-16. He is described here as, "The one who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven lamp stands." (Rev. 2:1) Remember the seven stars were explained in 1:20 as being the seven angels of the seven churches. Remember also that the seven angels were better translated seven messengers and here in this context refer to the teaching elders of the seven churches. Remember that they demonstrate the function of spiritual leadership in the church and are to be instruments through which Christ the Head of the church, mediates His rule. The emphasis of this imagery is the idea of Christ's absolute authority and complete control over these seven messengers.

The One who walks in the midst of the seven lamp stands:

This image is also taken from the Vision of Christ in 1:12-16 as well. Remember that the seven lamp stands symbolize the seven churches in Asia Minor according to Revelation 1:20. Remember that the emphasis here was on Christ's continual presence in the midst of His church. He promised His continual presence (Mt. 18:20; 28:19-20; Hebrews 13:5). The living Christ indwells His church to lead and empower it. So these two images taken together here not only identify Christ as the one who is the author of these letters, but also reinforce His sovereign authority and control over His church.

### *The Commendation to the Church in Ephesus:*

The Supreme Knowledge of Christ:

The Greek word *oida* indicates the Lord's knowledge in each of the seven letters as being a complete and full knowledge. "The Lord of the church knows everything there is to know about the church--both good and bad. Such perfect knowledge is evident in each letter as the Lord condemns and commends the churches."<sup>80</sup>

The Sacrificial Works of the Ephesian Believers:

"He began by acknowledging their **deeds** which is a general term summarizing all that follows. Specifically, Christ first commended the Ephesian believers for their **toil**. *Kopos* (toil) denotes labor to the point of sweat and exhaustion. It describes an all-out effort, demanding all that a person has to give--physically, mentally, and emotionally. The Ephesians were diligent workers for the cause of Christ. In the midst of the pagan darkness that surrounded them, they were aggressively evangelizing the lost, edifying the saints, and caring for those in need. **Perseverance** translates *hupomonei*, which denotes patience in trying circumstances. *Hupomonei* does not denote a grim, fatalistic resignation, but a courageous acceptance of hardship, suffering, and loss. This commendation indicates that despite their difficult circumstances, the Ephesian believers remained faithful to the Lord."<sup>81</sup>

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### The Spiritual Discernment of the Ephesian Believers:

The Ephesian church would not tolerate false doctrine or evil men. They had a high standard of holiness being sensitive to sin, false doctrine and likely followed the course of church discipline in Mt. 18:15ff. Even in the first century church false doctrine and false teachers posed a serious threat to the church. "They endured, Jesus declared, for the highest of motives: for His name's sake. And they had done so without having grown weary; they had not yielded to disappointment, ingratitude, or criticism. They remained faithful to the Lord, loyal to His word and to the work which He had called them."<sup>82</sup> They stood up strong against the Nicolaitans. There is some disagreement as to what heresy is being referred to here. Some believe that Nicolas in Acts 6 was a false believer who became an apostate and retained some influence within the church. Others believe that these Nicolaitans misrepresented the teaching of Nicolas. Whatever the case their deeds were clear and recorded throughout early church writings. They were involved in all sorts of sensual temptations leading to sexual immorality. They exaggerated the idea of Christian liberty to the point of antinomianism. Antinomianism is defined as the practice of overcoming by indulging the appetites to the point of exhausting them. It was the opposite of asceticism. The Ephesian Church did not tolerate such behavior, in fact they hated such behavior. The Ephesian believers also tested those claiming to be apostles and strongly dealt with those who proved to be false. They were not to be fooled by false doctrine or false teachers.

### *The Condemnation to the Church in Ephesus (2:4):*

There is only one condemnation given to the church in Ephesus, however it is a serious one. Christ says that they had left their first love. "Despite all the praiseworthy elements in the Ephesian church, the penetrating, omniscient gaze of the Lord Jesus Christ had spotted a fatal flaw. Though they maintained their doctrinal orthodoxy and continued to serve Christ, that service had degenerated into mechanical orthodoxy."<sup>83</sup> "He had their heads and their hands but not their hearts."<sup>84</sup> The message to this church is directed primarily at the elder of the church. The elders were held responsible and accountable for the spiritual condition of the church. The *you* here in this verse is the second person singular in the Greek. This statement does not mean the elder himself had left his first love but that the church as a collective whole had. This is not speaking to the individuals but to the corporate body. Some in the church (the overcomers) had not left their first love. Likewise there were some in the church who had never known the Lord at all. Notice also that the church did not lose their first love but they left their first love. The word means to quit or forsake and emphasizes responsibility. They purposely forsook their love for the Lord which resulted in routine mechanical orthodoxy. They had forsaken their love for God and Christ and as a result they had lost their love for the brethren as well as their love for the lost. We see this same pattern happen again and again with Old Testament Israel. This pattern exists throughout the book of Judges. Israel was rebuked by Jeremiah (Jer. 2:2-13) and also by Ezekiel (Ezek. 16:8-15). "As it had in Israel, the honeymoon had ended at Ephesus. The loss of a vital love relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ opened the doors to spiritual apathy, indifference to others, love for the world, compromise with evil, judgment, and ultimately, the death of the church altogether. Despite its outwardly robust appearance, a deadly spiritual cancer was growing at the heart of the Ephesian church."<sup>85</sup> The Ephesian church eventually closed during the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD.

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### *The Counsel given to the Church in Ephesus:*

*Remember:* from where you have fallen.

Forgetfulness often results in spiritual decline. Sometimes we may forget to pray, forget to read our Bible, forget our memory verses, or forget the message that we heard on Sunday. If we forget to read our Bible or pray for too many days in a row then we are no longer disciplined to do so and spiritual decline results. The Ephesians were being called to remembrance. "They were to recall their past commitments and reevaluate their present compromise."<sup>86</sup> The Ephesians needed to remember their strong spiritual heritage and the love for God that the first generation of Ephesian believers had possessed.

*Repent:*

They were to come before the Lord asking forgiveness and make a complete turn from their sin. They had not loved the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. They had not loved their neighbors as themselves. Sure they had done some great works, but their motivation in doing these great works was wrong. Their heart condition was wrong. Some were not even genuine believers thus they had a works based faith. Others were just performing these actions with the wrong motivations and for the wrong purpose. God was calling them to deliberately reject their sins, turn toward Him and then demonstrate their repentance.

*& Repeat:* the deeds you did at first.

They needed to demonstrate their repentance was genuine by doing what they had done at first. They needed to be devoted to Bible study, prayer, fellowship and worship. They needed to serve the Lord with a burning heart of love. This was to be an act of their will producing results. They were to begin doing those deeds which first characterized the church in Ephesus.

*Or Removal:* Of their lamp stand.

"Underscoring the seriousness of the situation, Christ warns the Ephesians to take the necessary steps to recover their first love for Him. He demanded a change or be chastened."<sup>87</sup> "Their refusal to repent would cause their removal: 'or else I will...remove your lamp stand out of its place' (v. 5). Loveless churches eventually lose their ability to shine in a lost world. The Ephesian church closed in the fifth century."<sup>88</sup> They lost their ability to shine and thus their lamp stand was removed.

### *The Challenge to the Overcomers in Ephesus:*

The overcomer as mentioned in the introduction section is a reference to the genuine believer. It does not refer to some who might have gained some spiritual victories in life but to all who become genuine believers. "True believers are assured of eternal life; they will eat of 'the tree of life' that was first mentioned in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9) and is now in heaven."<sup>89</sup> Man's sin resulted in this tree being forbidden to be eaten of. "The tree of life symbolizes eternal life. The Paradise of God is heaven (cf. Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4)."<sup>90</sup> The promise given to the overcomer (true genuine believers) is that of eternal life with God in heaven. What a precious promise for those in Ephesus who were true believers, who had not left their first love. What a precious promise to those who would follow the counsel of Christ to remember, repent, and repeat. All who overcome will receive the blessed reward of a glorified body and living eternally with God in heaven.