

## **The Church at Ephesus, a Legalistic Church— Restoring your Spiritual Passion for Christ (Revelation 2:1-7)**

Revelation 2-3 records Jesus' message to the seven churches identified in Revelation 1:11. While some interpreters see these churches as predictive of the course of church history, it's best to view these churches as historical first century churches from which all churches in all times can gain spiritual perspective. The first church Jesus addressed was the church in the city of Ephesus. At the time that John recorded Jesus' words the church at Ephesus already had a long and strong heritage. But like many spiritual movements, it had lost its focus over time. It upheld the truth, but legalistically neglected love. Jesus pointed out this church's flagging love for Him. The church at Ephesus serves as a warning for all Christians to fervently fire up their faith. We must carefully balance truth and love in order to shine for Jesus.

### **The Lord Jesus Christ commends the church's diligent labor and doctrinal purity (2:1-3).**

Like the church at Ephesus, every church must work hard at its Christ-given mission and guard doctrinal truth.

### ***Jesus addressed the ancient church at Ephesus, a church with a rich spiritual heritage (2:1a).***

Ephesus was a thriving metropolis in western Asia Minor in the first century. It also became a center for Christian expansion. Politically, Ephesus had a long history, having been colonized over a thousand years before New Testament times. It was the political capital of Asia Minor in the first century. Economically, the city of Ephesus was a hub of commerce and travel. Located along the Cayster River near the western coast of Asia Minor, Ephesus had an inland harbor that made this city a center of trade in the eastern Mediterranean region. Roadways into the inland of Asia Minor made the location of Ephesus economically strategic.

Ephesus was home to the worship of the Roman fertility goddess Diana, also known to the Greeks as Artemis. When Paul ministered in Ephesus a great uproar took place because some of the craftsmen who made silver idols of Diana began to feel the negative effects of Christianity on their trade (Acts 19:23-41). In fact, the prominence of Diana was such that the Ephesians had built a spectacular temple in her honor. This temple was so magnificent that it's considered one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Paul traveled to Ephesus at the end of his second missionary journey and stayed only briefly (Acts 18:18-21). He returned on his third missionary journey and stayed for over two years, establishing a citywide church (Acts 19:8-10). It was during this period of time that the book of Acts describes the riot in Ephesus, including a mention of the goddess Artemis and the city's theater (Acts 19:23-41). Later, Paul wrote the book of Ephesians to the Christians in Ephesus. Other key Christian leaders who served at Ephesus included Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:19), Timothy (1 Timothy 1:3), and according to church tradition the apostle John in his later years of ministry. The church had a strong beginning with strong leadership. It was central to Christian outreach into much of the interior of Asia Minor. Later in church history Ephesus hosted several important church councils.

***Jesus described Himself as holding the seven stars and walking among the seven golden lampstands (2:1b).***

Jesus “holds” or “holds firmly” (the term implies power or authority) the seven stars in His right hand. In Revelation 1:16 John saw these stars in his vision, and in verse 20 Jesus Christ identified the seven stars as the seven “angels” or “messengers” of the seven churches. These “angels” are probably not heavenly messengers but human messengers. They were representatives of the church. The fact that Jesus holds firmly these seven stars served as a reminder to the church at Ephesus that Christ protects His church and its leaders and is the ultimate authority over the church.

Jesus not only stands in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (Revelation 1:13), He also walks among them, being actively present among His churches. Revelation 1:20 identifies the seven golden lampstands as representing the seven churches. A church is to be a light in its community. Gold speaks of the high value of the church in God’s sight. The church at Ephesus was probably the most influential church of that region. The fact that Jesus walked among the seven churches would remind the Ephesian Christians that Christ is present in every church. The church at Ephesus, influential as it was, had to depend on the presence of Christ just like every other church large or small. It’s Jesus Christ who holds and builds His church.

***Jesus commends His people for their hard work, endurance, and rejection of false teachers (2:2-3).***

Jesus Christ commended the Ephesian church on several counts. This body of believers was certainly a steadfast church. First, the church at Ephesus was a hard working church. Christ commended the church at Ephesus for its exhaustive efforts. This church had a sound track record of good deeds. It had labored in the gospel ministry. There was certainly a high level of commitment on the part of the Christians in Ephesus. Coupled with this hard labor was their endurance. They did not give up on the Lord’s work.

Second, the church at Ephesus was a doctrinally pure church. The Ephesians showed no toleration for wicked people, referring most likely to false teachers within their church. Although there were some in that day claiming to be “apostles,” the Ephesians tested their claims and proved them to be false. These people were not leaders but liars. The church at Ephesus was doctrinally pure. In verse 6 Christ commended the Ephesian Christians for hating the works of the “Nicolaitans,” apparently a sect of false teachers. The church at Ephesus maintained doctrinal purity.

Third, the church at Ephesus was an enduring church. Christ commended this church for enduring hardships and bearing up under trials for His name’s sake. The Ephesians had endured victoriously and had not grown weary in the spiritual conflict. Although their toil and trials were tiresome to the point of exhaustion, they never tired of serving the Lord. In these ways every church should aim to be like the ancient church at Ephesus.

**The Lord Jesus Christ challenges the church to repent of its loveless legalism (2:4-6).**

Even with its great spiritual heritage and its diligent devotion to truth and to the Lord's work, the church at Ephesus had its faults. Specifically, the church had become unloving.

***Christians too easily lose their first love for the Lord (2:4).***

Jesus pinpointed this church's weakness by saying, "You have forsaken your first love." Jesus was possibly referring to their love for one another or He may have been referring to their original love for Him. Probably both facets of love had deteriorated over the years. Since loving God and loving our neighbor are closely aligned commands (see Mark 12:29-31) it would make sense that both were lacking at Ephesus. In all its doctrinal purity, the church at Ephesus had become an unloving body. We could call this the legalistic church, holding to truth without love. When we lose our original passion for Jesus Christ we risk falling into a ritualistic, legalistic form of faith.

***Those who reflect, repent, and return to their first love for the Lord can avoid premature judgment (2:5).***

What can a church or an individual Christian do to restore that original passion for Jesus Christ? The Lord Himself gives us the answer with three compelling commands. The first command is to "remember." The church at Ephesus was to reflect on its original love for Christ and consider how far it had fallen. When we want to restore our spiritual passion we need to remember the days when we were close to Christ, when we rejoiced in our salvation, and when our faith bubbled from within us. This exercise of remembering serves to whet our appetites for that kind of love.

The second command is brief, yet pointed. Repent! The church at Ephesus needed to recognize its sin and turn away from it. Repentance describes a change of mind that prompts a sorrow for sin and a change of direction, a reversing of our course.

The third command from Christ was to do the first works again, to return to those spiritual disciplines that kept the original passion glowing. Christians who have lost their passion should revert to that way of life that yielded growth in Christ. It's never too late to start fresh with God. Jesus Christ described the consequences of putting off such a change. The church at Ephesus risked losing its lampstand, its gospel influence on the surrounding community and region. A passionless church cannot reach a lost world. A passionless Christian cannot touch a hungry heart.

***A true love for the Lord will be reflected in a love for the truth (2:6).***

At this point Jesus referred to the works of a sect called the Nicolaitans (compare Revelation 2:15). The identity of this sect is uncertain. The term itself means "to conquer the people," and may refer to a group that in some way became oppressive over people's rights and freedoms in Christ. Some commentators have described this oppression as that of the clergy over the laity, though no historical evidence supports this view. Others have claimed that this sect consisted of followers of a man named "Nicolas," one of the deacons of Acts 6:5. However, nothing is really known of the teachings or ministry of Nicolas outside of Acts 6:5 and his upright character in that context would make this view suspect. Some early church writings link the Nicolaitans with the heresy of Gnosticism, a mystical belief that special

knowledge of God was available only to a select few. Other early writings link the Nicolaitans with a licentious lifestyle. Whatever the actual practices and teachings of this sect were, the Ephesian church shared in Christ's hatred for these practices and maintained pure doctrine.

**The Lord Jesus Christ comforts the church  
with the promise of eternal fellowship in God's presence (2:7).**

Jesus didn't end His message to the church at Ephesus with words of warning and judgment. Instead, He offered hope and comfort for all true believers.

***Christians must learn to pay attention to the Holy Spirit's message to the churches (2:7a).***

Jesus Christ invites all believers to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, believers both past and present. The words that Jesus revealed to John were also the words of the Holy Spirit, the triune God being fully involved in making known the truths of the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:1). The Holy Spirit speaks through God's revealed Word to the hearts of God's people, and we must pay attention to what He says.

***All true believers will enjoy eternal life with God in Paradise (2:7b).***

Jesus referred to those who "overcome" as being recipients of His blessings. While some interpreters see these as a special, spiritually superior group of Christians, the term likely refers to all true believers (compare 1 John 5:5). To true believers Jesus guarantees the privilege of eating from "the tree of life" that's in God's "paradise." This image refers to eternal life and joy in God's presence. The tree of life, mentioned in Genesis (2:9; 3:22, 24), will again be present in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 22:2, 14). What was lost in the Garden of Eden due to sin will one day be restored by Christ in heaven, including the joy, the peace, and the fellowship with God for which we as Christians long. There's hope for those who have lost their spiritual passion. Knowing we have heaven in our future, we can change our course from a ritualistic and legalistic faith to a vibrant, loving walk with Jesus Christ. We must carefully balance truth and love in order to shine for Jesus.