

We are beginning a look at Jesus' letter to the churches of Asia minor which is now Turkey. It is historical but it is also timeless. The heart of man is still the same. We have the same need *be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a manner that corresponds to the gospel.*¹ It may help for us to begin each letter by thinking in our mind's eye of Jesus standing in our midst addressing each letter to us. While we some commendations will apply, some words of correction will also apply. Let us take His words to heart, or as Jesus says at the end of each letter, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!"

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.* Revelation 2:1 The churches are named in a circular route that one would travel if he were delivering the letters. Each introduction begins with the same wording, "to the angel of the church in" a certain city on the route. Then it goes on to give a part of the description of Jesus who we saw in the first chapter as the author. I believe that in this case the translation should have been "messenger" instead of "angel". An angel would have no need for John to write down Jesus' words. The letter is addressed to the elder/ messenger that would present the message that particular Lord's Day. From Acts 20 we know that there were numerous elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:17ⁱⁱ), and John himself would be one among them during the last decades of his life.

Ephesus was a city that is estimated to have had a population as high as half a million residents. The coliseum where Aristarchus and Gaius were tried could seat 25,000 (Acts 19:29ⁱⁱⁱ). It was a port city, though the city itself was located three miles up the Cayster River. A colonnaded road led from the port to the center of the city. (Silt from the river has extended the shoreline another 3 miles from where it was in the first century.) Roman governors were required to enter the region through this free Roman city. Its claim to fame was the great temple of Diana, also called Artemis (Acts 19:35^{iv}). The image of Diana was a many breasted idol, and the worship at the temple was so wild and indulgent with thousands of temple prostitutes that the philosopher Heraclitus declared that those that lived in Ephesus could not help but weep over the immorality. It was not the capital, Pergamum had that honor, but the governor lived there, and it was the largest city in the region.

The New Testament tells us that Aquila and Priscilla were the founders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18,19^v), and were soon aided by the eloquent speaker, Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). The Apostle Paul had been through the city on his second missionary trip (Acts 18:19-21^{vi}), but it was on his third missionary tour that he spent three years there (Acts 20:31^{vii}). On his return trip to Jerusalem, he had all the elders of Ephesus journey to Miletus for a brief time of exhortation and instruction as he thought he would never see them again. He wanted the church he had invested so much time in to stay on track for years to come. This letter from Jesus is either one or four decades later depending on the dating of Revelation. I would hope that Paul's admonitions kept them on track for four decades, but it is quite possible that it was only eight years later when

the church needed this letter from the One who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

We must consider why Jesus used this specific description of Himself for this church. If you recall, the seven stars are the messengers/elders (angels) of the seven churches. They are in God's hand. They will faithfully convey the letter with the anointing that comes from the hand of the Lord upon them (Ezra 7:6^{viii}). That is an incentive to listen carefully and take heed to the message. I take great comfort in that thought. Without the hand of the Lord on the speaker, we are just another club. Without the anointing we are wasting our time, or worse, we are taking the opinions of man as God's instruction. That is why pastors must teach and preach the Word of God and not self-help ideas (2 Timothy 4:2^{ix}).

The lampstands are the churches. They are golden. Everything in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle was golden because it was to be used exclusively in service to God by the priests. The room's walls were covered in gold as was the table of showbread and the altar of incense. (See Exodus 37.) The gathering of believers to worship is a gathering of priests whose lives are to be dedicated to the service of God (1 Peter 2:9^x). Whatever we do should be done to the glory of God (Colossians 3:17^{xi}). Whatever our occupation, we should do it to the best of our ability with integrity as service to the Lord. It is likely that more than half of the believers of the church in Ephesus were slaves. Paul had taught them to serve their master as if they were serving the Lord. He told them that their service with this attitude was indeed service to the Lord (Ephesians 6:5-7^{xii}).

Jesus walks among us! Just as He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, He walks among the churches today. That is why these letters bring both praise and rebuke. He sees not only what we see, but also the heart behind what is done. The heart is the major focus of this letter to the Ephesians. How it should sober us to know that Jesus walks among us. One of the turning points in my life at the age of 16 was when with a group of young boys, we sensed Jesus walking among us. It broke us while filling us with joy and reverence at the same time. Picture Him standing walking the aisle during the sermon and looking into our hearts, for that is what He does.

But there is a subtle error that can creep in when we focus on physical service. It can become the goal and replace the heart relationship with Christ that produces a transformed attitude and actions.

Just last week I heard of someone repeating the error that if you do a certain action you have life. Life is Jesus (John 14:6^{xiii})! **Jesus said that the words He speaks to us are Spirit and they are life** (John 6:63^{xiv}). Out of that life flows the unique actions at the Spirit's leading, not rote performance of a routine that substitutes for life. Rote performance without the Spirit is death (Hebrews 6:1^{xv})! Be filled with the Spirit! (Ephesians 5:18^{xvi})! Get in the Word and let it get in you! (Colossians 3:16^{xvii})! Wait on the Lord (Psalm 27:14^{xviii})!

Listen to what happened to this church with such a rich spiritual history. 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.* Revelation 2:2 Jesus begins with a commendation as He does in most of the letters. He knows how hard we work at doing what is right, at helping others, and at enduring through the difficulties of life. **Patient endurance is a major theme of Revelation.** The need for patient endurance will be brought out at least twelve more times in this book.

Jesus never said it would be easy. In fact, He never made it easy to follow Him (Luke 14:26,27^{xix}). But I would add that living for what the world offers is not any easier. Satan will tell you it is, but even the people who think they have it all tend to end up empty and depressed. The ones at the top, disillusioned by the world's pleasure, often take their own life. But Jesus' yoke is light (Matthew 11:29,30^{xx}). If you are walking in Him, yoked to Him, He makes the burden lighter, helping us to patiently endure (Colossians 2:6^{xxi}).

This verse encourages me. I hope it does you too. **He knows your work and toil and patient endurance.** The One that matters knows! The world may not know, but friend, if you have been giving your all for Jesus, He knows. Endure! By staying faithful you are honoring your Savior and laying up treasure in heaven!

He also knows how they could not bear with the evil false apostles. There were those who took on themselves the title of Ambassador from God. They tried to preach another gospel to the Ephesians. But the Ephesians tested them and found them to be false (Ephesians 4:14^{xxii}). They did not live what they preached, and what they preached did not line up with the Apostles' Doctrine. Some of them proclaimed a religion of works, of keeping the law. "Trust in Jesus, sure," they say, "but keep the law and then you will be saved" (Galatians 3:1-3^{xxiii}).

Salvation is Jesus plus nothing! If Jesus is in you, the Spirit will cause you to desire what is good and lead you in service. The law orders good things, but without the Spirit they are meaningless (Philippians 2:13^{xxiv}). Test those who proclaim to be bringing you direction. Keeping pure doctrine is a keynote in the letters to the churches. The Lord Jesus was holding the star in His hand, not the false apostles. Jesus commends those who test the messengers' lives and teaching.

³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. Revelation 2:3 Once again Jesus mentions their patient endurance. If you think our city is bad, Ephesus would make this town look like Saintville. There are times in our Christian walk when we just need to endure for His name's sake. That means representating Jesus to the community. There are so many church splits, ungodly "Christian" businesses and bad examples, partly because of the abundance of people that label themselves Christian without accepting Jesus as Lord. Christians are supposed to be "little Christs". They are to represent His love and grace and mercy as well as His attitudes toward evil and false teaching (Psalm 97:10^{xxv}).

In Roman cities, if you did not pay homage to the town god, or the guild god, or the market god, you were picked out as the reason for any sickness or calamity. You were kicked out of your trade guild. You might be denied use of the community well. When someone accused you of wrong, you were guilty because you were a Christian. Imagine the patient bearing up of the Ephesians. We have it easy! They did not grow weary under all that. The Ephesians had learned to take it.

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Revelation 2:4 They were doing good things, testing false teachers, and bearing up under bigotry of the community, but they had lost the very reason they were doing it all. Life had become an effort of the flesh instead of work of the Spirit. Instead of flowing out of a love for Jesus and His life in them, it became doing the right thing. They were going through the motions, but the motions were not directed by a passionate relationship with the One who died in their place and was now gloriously alive among them. He was walking in their midst, and they no longer saw Him. Those glowing bronze feet have nail

holes, but they quit noticing. Communion was just another ritual that is the Christian thing to do (Isaiah 29:13^{xxvi}).

The love they had at first was the love that saw Jesus' love for them displayed on the cross (1 John 4:19^{xxvii}). In spite of their prior indulgence in the wickedness of Ephesus, Jesus called them out and chose them for His bride, just like He called Israel out of Egypt (Jeremiah 2:2^{xxviii}). He clothed them in His righteousness and called them to be His special messengers to show to those in dark Ephesus the difference His life and love makes. It was so merciful and gracious a calling that they could hardly imagine such love could be true. They embraced it and it transformed them. But that was years ago. Passionate response to the Spirit became actions and actions turned to routines. Love waned to mere appreciation and waned even further to mere ritual.

The fire of passion for the Lord must be stoked by time waiting upon Him in His Word and worship and praise, or it will fade (Psalm 62:5^{xxix}) The world, flesh, and the devil will throw water on that white hot flame at every opportunity (Galatians 5:17^{xxx}). Only when it is white hot will that water turn to steam before it hits the flames. That is why the great command is not a work; it is a passion. Love the Lord your God with your ALL (Deuteronomy 6:5^{xxxi})!

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. Revelation 2:5 Remember the time in your life when you were the most thrilled to be in prayer and excited at any chance to worship the Lord with the family of God? **If you are not loving God as much or more than you ever have before, you are backsliding.** You have not been stoking the fire by being with Him. You have put yourself first and Him second and that makes everything upside down. Notice that Jesus commended them for their works, but now tells them to do the works they did at first. They were doing the right things, because the works they did at first were from the heart (John 6:29^{xxxii}).

Repent! It means to have a total turn around in your frame of mind. Instead of seeing the routine you have slowly sunk into as acceptable or even honorable, see it as God sees it, backsliding. Stop playing the game and get serious with God. Do the work you did at first, which was to see your true condition, repent, and let His grace and mercy wash you clean and light a new fire in your heart. Put Him back on the throne of your heart (Proverbs 4:23^{xxxiii}). Love Him!

If we do not, the church will no longer be in our town. Somewhere in history the passion of these churches in Asia died, and now there are no longer churches in most of these seven cities. When will the church in our town die? May our answer ever be, "Not on our watch or that of our spiritual children!" We have to warn the next generation of believers. We must set the example for them and encourage them (Proverbs 22:6^{xxxiv}).

⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Revelation 2:6 There is little historical evidence of exactly what this group taught. If the writing of the early church father Irenaeus is correct, "they lived lives of unrestrained indulgence." Clement of Alexandria added that the Nicolaitans "abandon themselves to pleasure like goats... leading a life of self-indulgence"^{xxxv} In the letter to Pergamum the teaching was connected to Balaam's teaching that led Israel astray, which was probably referring to using the Moabite women to lead them to sexual sin (Numbers 25:1^{xxxvi}). This would go right along with what we read in 2 Peter 2 and Jude (Jude 4^{xxxvii}). They

took Christian liberty to an extreme, even violating God’s moral laws. In a town with such a problem with immorality, it would have been a tempting doctrine. The doctrine is alive and as destructive today. “Do what you will. God loves you,” they teach, “and he wants you to enjoy life, so do not suppress your inner urges.”

7^a He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Revelation 2:7a Jesus used the phrase in the gospels (Matthew 11:15^{xxxviii}). It came from Isaiah 6:9,10^{xxxix}. I have come to understand this phrase in a whole new light. Some people do not have an ear to hear. They have no desire to consider they may be wrong. They have made up their mind and they do not want to be confused with the truth. They want to instruct you, but never want to ask what you think of their teaching. When someone presents the facts and the Word of God and you do not like it, be very careful. Examine your heart (2 Corinthians 13:5^{xl}). See if you want to hear the truth. Discern if it is true or not by going to the Word and godly counsel, and then surrender to the truth. Also notice that we are to hear not just what the Spirit says to this church, but to the churches (plural). Take each of these letters to heart.

7^b To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Revelation 2:7b Every letter ends with a wonderful promise to the ones that overcome. Who are the overcomers? (1 John 5:4,5^{xli}) They are the ones that have an ear to hear the Spirit and respond. Chapter 12:11^{xlii} tell us the ones that overcome Satan do so by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, for they love not their lives even unto death. That requires a passionate love of Jesus and what He has done for them. It is a love that puts Him above all else. It sees Him as the greatest desire one could ever have, for He is the all in all (Ephesians 1:23^{xliii})!

And for that one who overcomes, Jesus grants what Adam and Eve were kept from taking in their fallen state, the tree of life. He is the bread that came down from heaven. (John 6:51^{xliv}) He is the One who asks us to partake of Him. The living Word will be our sustenance in the paradise of God. It is continual fellowship with Him. Allow me to close by asking you, in Jesus stead, what He asked Peter. **“Do you really love me?”** (John 6:57^{xlv}; 21:16^{xlvi}) Is that love as passionate as the love you had at first? If not, you know what to do.

Questions

- 1 Who is to receive the letter?
- 2 Describe Ephesus physically and spiritually.
- 3 Why is the lampstand gold?
- 4 What is life?
- 5 What is the commendation in verse 2?
- 6 What is the source of truly good works?
- 7 Explain the commendation of verse 3.
- 8 What is the love we had at first?
- 9 How do we lose it?
- 10 How do we get it back?
- 11 Who is an overcomer?
- 12 What are they promised?
- 13 Do you really love Jesus?

ⁱ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Preaching the Word: Revelation—The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 55.

ⁱⁱ **Acts 20:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Acts 19:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel.

^{iv} **Acts 19:35 (ESV)**

³⁵ And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?"

^v **Acts 18:18-19 (ESV)**

¹⁸ After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. ¹⁹ And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.

^{vi} **Acts 18:19-21 (ESV)**

¹⁹ And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. ²⁰ When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. ²¹ But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.

^{vii} **Acts 20:31 (ESV)**

³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

^{viii} **Ezra 7:6 (ESV)**

⁶ this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

^{ix} **2 Timothy 4:2 (ESV)**

² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

^x **1 Peter 2:9 (ESV)**

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

^{xi} **Colossians 3:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

^{xii} **Ephesians 6:5-7 (ESV)**

⁵ Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man,

^{xiii} **John 14:6 (ESV)**

⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

^{xiv} **John 6:63 (ESV)**

⁶³ It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

^{xv} **Hebrews 6:1 (ESV)**

¹ Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,

^{xvi} **Ephesians 5:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

^{xvii} **Colossians 3:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

xviii **Psalm 27:14 (ESV)**

14 Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

xix **Luke 14:26-27 (ESV)**

26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

xx **Matthew 11:29-30 (ESV)**

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

xxi **Colossians 2:6 (ESV)**

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,

xxii **Ephesians 4:14 (ESV)**

14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

xxiii **Galatians 3:1-3 (ESV)**

1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. 2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

xxiv **Philippians 2:13 (ESV)**

13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

xxv **Psalm 97:10 (ESV)**

10 O you who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

xxvi **Isaiah 29:13 (ESV)**

13 And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

xxvii **1 John 4:19 (ESV)**

19 We love because he first loved us.

xxviii **Jeremiah 2:2 (ESV)**

2 "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.

xxix **Psalm 62:5 (ESV)**

5 For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.

xxx **Galatians 5:17 (ESV)**

17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

xxxi **Deuteronomy 6:5 (ESV)**

5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

xxxii **John 6:29 (ESV)**

29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

xxxiii **Proverbs 4:23 (ESV)**

23 Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

xxxiv **Proverbs 22:6 (ESV)**

6 Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

xxxv cited in Barclay, The Revelation of John, 1:67

xxxvi **Numbers 25:1 (ESV)**

1 While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.

xxxvii **Jude 1:4 (ESV)**

4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

xxxviii **Matthew 11:15 (ESV)**

15 He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

xxxix **Isaiah 6:9-10 (ESV)**

9 And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but

do not perceive.’ ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be ealed.”

^{xi} **2 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

^{xii} **1 John 5:4-5 (ESV)**

⁴ For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

^{xiii} **Revelation 12:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

^{xliii} **Ephesians 1:23 (ESV)**

²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

^{xliv} **John 6:51 (ESV)**

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

^{xlv} **John 6:57 (ESV)**

⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.

^{xlvi} **John 21:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”