

Letters To Seven Churches (Part Two): Ephesus

Crusty Old Soldiers

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When we write anything, whether it be a memo or a note, an email, a blog, an essay, an article, term paper, sermon, even a whole book, we do it for a reason. We have a purpose for our writing. Even snide comments written in a Facebook quote are written with purpose—to be snide. If we had no reason for our words, we would not write them. We would just do nothing. A written message without purpose would be mere gobbledygook. Nonsense, unreadable, not understandable. It would be like the output of the proverbial chimpanzee pecking on a typewriter—totally meaningless and random.

Communications like letters are purposeful. It does not matter who writes them, there is a reason for it. Consider the mail that you receive in your mailbox. A letter can be written just to say hello or to keep in touch. Letters could be newsy, relating events that one may have witnessed or participated in. Some letters are invitations to an event. Or maybe they are thank-yous for some kindness done to another, maybe to thank you for a gift. Some letters seek a response or some sort of input, like surveys you get from some company you may deal with. Others, and we get seem to get a lot of these, are requests for contributions or for charity. I am constantly getting stuff from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse, and all kinds of others. They always want money.

Other letters can be congratulatory or they could become condemnatory. It just depends on what is put in those letters. They could be informational, like we get a monthly "usage and tips" letter from Duke Energy telling us how we can save money and save energy if we just do this to our home or what have you. Or we tend to get dozens of wasteful privacy policy letters from various companies that have our information and they are required by law every year to send you a letter stating their privacy policy.

A letter could be intended as a warning, like a late notice. You have not paid your bill and consequences are coming, or it can be like a summons, say to jury duty or the dreaded IRS audit notice. Our mail overflows with advertising letters. It seems like most of them are from credit card companies, but they want your business. They want you to know that they are out there and if you have a problem, they can solve it.

It is easy to see, if you start thinking about these things, that letters can have multiple functions and are written for many different reasons. So when the most purposeful Being in the entire universe writes a letter, we can be sure that when He wrote that He did it with a purpose. He has a reason for why He sent that letter. Probably He had multiple purposes in mind, knowing the great mind that He has, and He is trying to accomplish all kinds of things. And we know from the principle there in Isaiah 55:11 about His word, when it goes out from Him, does not come back to Him empty but it fulfills what He sent it out to do. That when He writes a letter with a purpose, which He does, He will make sure that all those purposes are fulfilled by the end.

So when Jesus Christ writes a letter, He does not write it frivolously or uninformedly or ignorantly. He writes very pointedly, and He writes very efficiently so that we can get the point. One of His titles is "the truth." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." And in His letters to the seven churches, He

writes the truth. As shocking as that may be, that He writes us the truth and we have to read it, it is the truth about our attitudes. Actually, it is the truth about us that we cannot see. It is about our attitudes, our proclivities, our faith, or lack thereof, and the truth about the state of the church. So because we are bondservants of His—He has bought us (we were bought with a price), He owns us, He is our master—we must take it, that is, the truth that He writes so baldly in some of these letters. We must take it and use it to develop into the people He wants us to be. We just have to. Our Lord and Master is telling us something we need to hear and so we had better listen.

If you will please open your Bibles to Matthew the 28th chapter. We will read the last three verses in that chapter, starting with verse 18, where Jesus says,

Matthew 28:18-20 Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The purpose of the letters to the seven churches is to ensure our faith all the way to complete sanctification and salvation by whatever means possible. These letters appear in a book of prophecy situated or centered on the Day of the Lord. And these letters are supposed to be applicable all the way up until that time, no matter where in history you happen to be. Remember, He does say, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." So it does not matter when you were in the church, what particular time in history, He wants you to listen to what is being said there because there are points, exhortations, commands, and instructions that are going to be applicable to you.

Now they are going to be most applicable during the Day of the Lord when the rubber really meets the road and people are going to either fish or cut bait, as it were. (I know I am mixing my metaphors terribly, but I think you understand what I am trying to say.) But as our High Priest and the Head of the church, that is Jesus Christ's job, to get us ready. He works at it 24/7. He is always working to make sure that we are in His Kingdom. So He writes these letters from the heart to guarantee that those who read them and keep them faithfully—those whom He has called will be saved. That is what He wants. That is his job. That is His purpose right now that God the Father has given Him as Head of the church and as High Priest—to get us ready, to make sure that we will be saved all the way to the first resurrection.

So these letters, if you will, prove that He is indeed with us, like He says here in Matthew 28:20, "even to the end of the age." He is instructing and He is encouraging and helping us to endure to the end and enter His Kingdom. That is what He wants.

Remember, His Father has called you specifically, and He has given them into Jesus Christ's hand. He takes that as a great responsibility to make sure that you make it. Because He, like the Father, loves us very much, and He wants us to be there with Him forever. So to that end, that is, knowing that He is there trying to make sure that we endure to the end and be in His Kingdom, we will wade into these seven letters today from our Savior with the letter to Ephesus. We are going to speak about that.

I want you to remember, bring to mind again, from my first sermon that we are not going to approach these letters as prophecies, mainly. That will not be my main purpose, to approach them as

prophecies. We have done that a lot in the past. My purpose is to approach these letters as epistles. Like the epistle of Paul to the Romans or his two epistles to the Corinthians or his epistle to the Galatians, and so on. We are going to approach these as letters to a church or letters to people in the church. But most specifically, I want us to think of them as letters to *you* that Jesus Christ cares enough for you that He left you information and instruction so that you can make it.

In other words, we are not approaching them like prophecies. We are not trying to see who or which church fits what description in these various letters. Instead, we want to understand and use Christ's insight into the church of God that He shows in these letters. We want to see them as exhortations to us to, as Peter writes, "make our calling and election sure," and therefore, in the end, rise in the first resurrection victorious, having overcome ourselves, and Satan and this world.

Before we dig into the letter to Ephesus, it will help us a great deal to see what the seven letters have in common, because that is a very important thing so we can see how He wrote these things, what the format is, what they share, and therefore it will help us key in on the things that are different. These seven letters all have essentially the same format. It is almost like they were written from a template, and He is putting things into this template as pertains to those particular churches. They share certain phrases and certain exhortations. I want to give you seven points of commonality that we should know and be looking for as we study these letters. It is fairly extensive and I want to comment on each one, and I hope this does not go too long, so I can get to the letter to Ephesus.

1. They begin with a salutation that names an addressee. They name who it is written to, and in each one, it is written to an angel of a particular church—such as to the angel of the church at Ephesus. You know, that is the particular angel that He is writing to and later on it is to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, etc. Now Christ speaks in these letters in the second person singular. He is writing, let us say, from me to you, and the "you" is a *singular* person, the angel, as it were, in the first verse. And who this angel is, as I mentioned in the last sermon, we do not know for sure. It is just a messenger, an envoy, a representative. It could be anyone that represents that particular group of people. So He is writing to a singular individual who represents that particular church. He is writing to a second person singular, a "you" singular. If we are going to receive the instruction and respond to the exhortations that are being given in the letters, it is best for us, most helpful for us to understand the salutation as having your name in it. So *you* are the angel in that church, so you can take it personally as a personal communication from your Savior that will get you to endure to the end and be saved. I want you, as we go through these letters, to take them personally as God speaking directly to you.

2. As part of the salutation, the speaker, who is Jesus Christ, identifies Himself with descriptive phrases. And most of these come from the description of Christ that appears in Revelation 1. You know all that—He is in the midst of seven lampstands, one like the Son of Man clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band, etc, etc as it goes through that description of the glorified resurrected Christ. What He wants to do with that salutation is draw our mind back to this amazing description of Him showing how much power He has and how glorious He is and how He has died for us. And now He lives again and He is working in our behalf. So in the salutation, He wants us to remember how great He is and powerful and how interested He is in us and how much He cares about us and how He is going to use all that power and authority that we saw back in Matthew 28 for our benefit. "All authority has been given" into His hand. He is the One who, if we listen to Him, can accomplish anything. We need to always have that reminder with each letter so that we understand that this is the great King of the universe who is going to give us the help that we need and is telling us *exactly* what we need to hear. He wants us to know and remember who exactly it is who is watching, evaluating, judging, helping, rewarding, and doing all that He can

to bring us into His Kingdom. And again, if we do this, it makes these letters very personal, just between you and him.

3. Christ, after this salutation, tells what He knows about each church's works. It is a pointed declaration from Him, from our Savior, that He *sees* all, He *knows* all, and He *judges* all. We better be careful. That is not so bad if all our works are good. But if our works are bad, then we need to fear because we are not hiding them from Him. As a matter of fact we *cannot* hide from Him at all. Even our innermost, most private thoughts, attitudes, and opinions. He sees those things. If you remember Hebrews 4:13, it says everything is open to His eyes. It is like He has got us in a wrestling hold down on the mat and He is looking right into us and we cannot get out of the hole, we are pinned, and so we had better react properly and do what He says.

4. After the declaration of our works, Christ pronounces a *verdict* on the church's condition, whatever that condition may happen to be. And we know that the verdict is true and just. There are no loopholes with Him. He has given you exactly what He sees and exactly what is right or wrong, and it is just that He is accusing us of these things. There is no "but, but, but" from us. This is exactly what is wrong, and He is not pussyfooting around. He is giving us exactly what we need to hear even though it may be hard to take. He is often very blunt—often shockingly blunt—about what the problem is. A couple of churches get *no commendation* at all, all they get is, "Hey, this is what's wrong with you. You better shape up." And a couple of the churches receive *no condemnation*. "You guys are doing okay. Keep up the good work." But there are those that are not the other three are, "Well, this is good, but this is bad. And so you need to work on that. You got to keep on doing what is good and then work on the thing that is bad."

5. Once He gives that verdict, He commands the church to do something, to take some action. Whether it is like in Ephesus, He tells them to remember. Other ones, He says, be faithful, other ones He says, repent. Other ones, He says, hold fast. But He gives some sort of a command that leads to a necessary act or necessary work to overcome the problem, whatever it is, whatever happens to be in that particular church. Or it is something that is necessary so that they can endure to the end, so that they can hang on. "If you do this, you'll hang on. You'll have the right frame of mind. You'll be doing the right things and you'll endure to the end." So it is very important that we listen to the things that He tells us to do.

6. Each letter contains the general exhortation "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." *Each one of the letters*. Again, this is singular and personal. "He," that is third person singular. "He who has an ear, let him hear." He wants each person who is reading this to take it personally. This phrase is not always in the same place in the letter, but it is generally toward the end when He has gone through most of these things. It repeats in each letter because there are lessons and warnings and helps in each letter that apply to everyone. I do not know that *one letter* will apply *only* to a person, and none of the others will. I do not think that is the case. I think there are things in each letter that we can use—in every letter. We need to make sure that we, even though we may think, "Oh, I'm a Philadelphian," you better listen to some of the other letters because you may find out that you are really not. You may be a Smyrnan and you are headed for martyrdom or something, and that is fine, but there are probably things that you can learn along the way. So we need to make sure that we take each of these letters to heart because Christ wants us to apply them to ourselves. Because we may have a blind spot somewhere and maybe His harsh words in a particular letter will wake us up out of our lethargy and remove the scales from our eyes about a certain problem we have.

7. Each letter contains a promise of reward to the one who overcomes, or the one who is victorious in his Christian fight. And this, of course, is usually at the end as well. Again, this is something that I found in my studies over these letters, that it is singular and personal, "to him." That is a third person objective but singular: "To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life." It is one person that He is talking to there, not necessarily to the whole church. So each one of these rewards that we find at the end of each letter has a corresponding reference in either Revelation 21 or Revelation 22. Those are the New Heavens and the New Earth chapters. So what is being said here is that if you endure to the end, make these corrections, then your reward is eternal life with God in the New Heavens and the New Earth. You are going to be there forever. You are going to see and be able to use and live in all the wonder and the splendor of the New Heavens and the New Earth. They all basically boil down to that. But there are very interesting little details and tidbits in each one of these rewards that is particular to the church that it is talking to. And it is kind of interesting to look at them that way.

This one is not part of the list because it does not happen in every one of the letters. But six of the seven letters contain an allusion to, or an outright statement about the return of Christ. Six out of seven—that is pretty good. That is most of them. In a few cases, the wording is extremely urgent. Like in the letter to Philadelphia: "I come quickly!" In the letter to Laodicea: "I am at the door! Let me in." It is very urgent. He is giving us an idea that times are short. Now, I do not want you to think of this, necessarily, as in Christ is going to come in 2022. No, what I want you to think of is, your life may be over very soon. You are human, you die. Christ may come to *you*, as it were, in the next few months or the next few years, yet still not come to the world for who knows how many years. You do not want Him to come to you quickly in terms of any kind of condemnation because you have not fulfilled your part in this Christian life. He wants you to finish the job while you have life. So you need to make sure that you take these exhortations personally as if you are going to die tomorrow. It is that urgent. You need to shape up *now* because you may not personally have the time to delay.

Like I said, these things are applicable at any time in history, whether it is right at the return of Christ or whether it is a thousand years before the return of Christ, we only have a short time in our own lives to make these changes and to prove ourselves and be pleasing to God. So we better do these things now and not put them off. You could walk outside and get hit by a truck, and that would be the end of your life. Would you have done the things that you need to do to make your calling and election sure? That is for your own self to judge. But that is the way these letters are constructed so that we feel the urgency to do these things right now because Christ is coming.

The only letter that lacks one of these very urgent "I come quickly" statements or "I am coming soon" is the one to Smyrna, just to mention that that is the only one that lacks one. So if nothing else, if we believe that we are living in the last days, then we better take this time element seriously because time is short. We need to respond immediately, urgently, to the correction that He gives us and the advice Jesus offers in these letters. No matter whether we think we are, you know, part of one church or another, they apply to everyone.

Alright, we got through the introduction. Now into the book of Revelation, chapter two. We are going to look at the church of Ephesus. Rather than reading the whole letter, I am just going to read them one verse at a time, and we will just pick our way through these from that. Let us just read verse 1.

Revelation 2:1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.'

The word Ephesus means desirable and evidently the city itself, or living in the city of Ephesus, was a very desirable thing for the people who lived in the region and actually throughout the Roman Empire. One of the reasons for this is that Ephesus was a what was called a free city. That is, it was a self-governing city. It did not have the Roman overlords looking over their shoulder too much. They had their own governor. They had their own councils, and they could run the city essentially the way they wanted to as long as they did not step over the line that Rome had given them. Especially they did not want any kind of insurrection or as we see in Acts 19, they did not want a tumult in the city where they would have to call the Romans in. And if they did that, then the Romans would probably take over their government and they would no longer be free. So it was very important to the Ephesians to maintain the status of being a free or self-governing city.

If a person was a cosmopolitan sort, Ephesus was in some cases better than Rome as the crossroads of civilization, much better to live in Ephesus rather than under the eye of the emperor in Rome. But it sat at the crossroads of three important trade routes so peoples from different areas of the world were always coming through, they were bringing their wares in to sell, and the Ephesians were selling to them. Things were going pretty well there in the first century in Ephesus.

Ephesus was the chief city of Asia Minor, that area we call Turkey now, especially the western part of Asia Minor. It was its de facto political capital, although Pergamos was technically the center of Roman government in the area. But Ephesus was bigger than Pergamos and it was more important, much more commercially viable, a lot more going on culturally, and so Ephesus was the real power in the area. It is kind of like Charlotte in North Carolina. It is not the capital, but it is the biggest city in North Carolina, and more goes on there, it seems, than most other parts of the state. I just thought I would throw that similarity in get kind of modern look at that.

It was also the center of Artemis or Diana worship, something that is brought out also in Acts 19. They had the temple of Diana there, or the temple of Artemis, and the emperor cult there in Ephesus was quite popular. I guess they respected the emperor because he gave them their freedom and so they were very willing to do all the little things to please the emperor and the emperor cult. In addition, as Acts 19 tells us, the economy was invested very heavily in all facets of Diana worship. Paul ran afoul of the silversmiths who made little idols and shrines for Diana because he was telling people not to worship Diana. They found that their sales were plummeting and that made them persecute the young church there. I should also mention just kind of offhandedly that because of the temple of Diana there, church members had to worry about the cultic prostitution that was going on there. Diana worship was a rather sexualized ritual and so it was not a nice place to live in that respect.

That same chapter, Acts 19, tells us that witchcraft was also a going concern in Ephesus and Paul's preaching resulted in the burning of 50,000 silver pieces worth of witchcraft books. Even though it may have been the jewel of Asia Minor, there were a lot of evil, a lot of sinful things going on in Ephesus, and the church had to be aware of these things and resist them.

In Ephesians, there was the philosopher Heraclitus, known as the Weeping Philosopher who was known for his pessimism and sorrow, kind of a counterpart to Jeremiah. He wrote that Ephesians were fit only to be drowned, and that the reason why he could never laugh or smile was because he lived amongst such terrible uncleanness. Even though he was a native Ephesian, he did not think much of the city or its people.

That was what the people of Ephesus had come out of, and they still lived amid such evils. So they were always aware of these things. And if you think about it, even though a little bit of the details are different, some of the window dressing is not quite the same, it is actually not too far removed from our culture today. We can understand a little bit of what they lived among—highly sexualized, false teachings, false religion, witchcraft and other kinds of occult, etcetera, a lot of commerce, a lot of people going after the almighty dollar, as it were. There are commonalities between Ephesus and our culture today.

Now, as we move through this verse, our Savior identifies Himself as the One described in chapter 1, "who holds the seven stars" and "walks among the seven golden lampstands." We need to pay particular attention to the two verbs: "He holds" and "walks"—very important—as well as the descriptor "in His right hand" and the propositional phrase, "in the midst of." Those are very important words. We need to key in on them. His first words after the the addressee are very pointed to the Ephesians. He is already beginning to correct their misconceptions that have played a major role in their problems, which He mentions later.

Let me explain this. Remember, He calls Himself "He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands." The underlying misconception that the Ephesians had, or those who are like the Ephesians, is that Jesus is uninvolved, uncaring, and removed from the life of the church and its members. Almost a Deistic perception. We could say that these Ephesians thought of things as Jesus, having three and a half years of preaching the gospel and dying and being resurrected and ascend to heaven and then He just went away and left the church to fend for itself. I am exaggerating a little bit, but that is the idea that was in their conscience, maybe, back there in their attitudes, their thinking that Jesus was not there with them, that He was far away.

Now, Jesus says, in describing Himself as He who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, He is essentially saying, "You guys are wrong on all counts. Look, people, the One who is writing to you is the One who holds His people in His right hand and the One who's walking in the middle of the churches." They may not see Him physically, but they should be able to perceive that He is there and aware and helping. And I want you to understand, He says, "You are in My *right* hand." The seven stars are in His right hand. That is the strong hand on most people, on right handers. He is saying, He wants us to think about who He is, this great Being, there is no one who is going to be able to take His church and His people out of His hand. As a matter of fact, He said that while He was here on the earth.

John 10:27-30 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. [That, by the way, is one of our mottos in the Church of the Great God.] And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one."

They are have one mind on this. They are going to protect us and help us and guide us and get us to the Kingdom. They are going to save us. He is reminding these Ephesians, "Look, you've *totally* misperceived Me and My work and presence in the church. I am there! I am always there. I'm always working. I'm always protecting. I'm almost always guiding, always directing." He could not be closer to them. He is touching them. They are in the palm of His hand. He is upholding them. He is holding them *and* upholding them. They need to understand, these Ephesians and whoever else needs to understand, that Jesus Christ is with us. He did not say that just as a platitude. *He really is with us.* He is in us by His Spirit, and so do not think that He has gone far away or he does not care or that He is not working. That offends Him, that anyone would think that about Him and His work in the church. The same could be said about His activity among the lampstands or the churches. He walks among them. He is busy working in *all* of the churches. He is active. He is doing what he does to help them in their works.

These Ephesians had somehow become so detached from God that they forgot how to see Him at work in their lives or within the church. As we go on, we will add some understanding about them. But they had become so battle weary, they had seen so much, gone through so much, they had become kind of blase' about things. And they had lost sight of Christ. They had lost sight of Him as a person. Their relationship had deteriorated because they were so busy fighting all the time. (I will explain that in a few minutes.) They needed to be reminded by the Boss right away as He began the letter, that He is *always* present and active. He is always there.

John 5:17 Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working."

It is part of His character that He is always at work on behalf of His people and of His purpose. He is never slacking off. He is never going off for a vacation. He is never taking a nap. He is never weary of what He does, even if it is repetitive and boring. He always does it because His people need it. He is not one to go away or quit, and if we feel that He has somehow gone away and neglected us, we need to ask, "Who moved?" That was one of the few things Joseph Tkach, Sr ever said that I thought was well done. He said that a lot in his first year or two after becoming Pastor General in the Worldwide Church of God. "If we think God has gone far away, we need to ask ourselves "Who moved?" and it was not God. God is constant; God is faithful. *We* are the variable. *We* are the weak element in all of this, the weak factor. The problem is *always* with us. So if we feel distant from Christ, we have got the problem. It is not Christ's problem because He is upholding us in His right hand. He is walking among us. He is doing the work, so we need to get our attitude straight.

Let us take verses 2 and 3 together because they go together, they flow together. He tells them,

Revelation 2:2-3 "I know your works, your labor, your patience [or your endurance], and yet you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary."

When He mentions their works here, He commends them. They had done a good job in these areas, So His "I know your works" is an important declaration to this church. He is aware of them and all that they have done. Here He is still proving that He is there with them and working among them. He is saying, "I know what you've done. I've been there every step of the way. I've seen you, I've helped you. I've given you patience. I've helped you endure. I've helped you to open your eyes to see those

who are false apostles. I've helped you to understand all the false teachings that you could fight against." He has done all that. He has been with them all the way. So He does commend them for all their painful toils in getting the church started amidst a great deal of wickedness and deception and controversy and persecution and upheaval. They had really done well in those areas.

When the church was founded we have those things happening in Acts 19 that could have made the church just die right there. But they did not. They held on. They persevered. They did well. When false teachers came through, they booted them out. They did what was right and good. So the Ephesians score high marks for their steadfast endurance and their intolerance of heresy. They consider themselves the defenders of the faith. They are sticklers for orthodoxy. If they heard "there be monsters out there," they were the first one to get their sandals on, pull out a spear, and go after them. In another sermon that I gave years ago, I called them crusty old soldiers or the dragon slayers. They were willing to get up and fight for the faith at a moment's notice. They seem to have taken what Paul wrote specifically to them in Ephesians 6. They took it to heart, he says in verse 10.

Ephesians 6:10-13 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

That describes the Ephesians to a T. They took on the armor of God and they wore it as a badge of honor. They would be the first ones into the fray because they felt the faith was worth defending. They became the true Christian soldiers, almost literally, in the way they went about it. They were God's shock troops, I think, as they saw themselves, that they were willing to put down whatever they were doing and go defend the faith. And that was good, to a point. Then we get to verse 4.

Revelation 2:4 "Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love."

Oh, what a condemnation. It does not sound like much just putting it that way, but it is. It is devastating. It is maybe one of the worst things that Jesus could tell you. Jesus criticizes them for leaving their first love, departing from their original devotion, if you want to put it that way. As a matter of fact, some scholars say this is the language of divorce—they had divorced themselves from their first love. They had left it like one would leave a spouse. What they had divorced themselves from was their former intimate relationship with their Savior. Oh, they still believed the truth mattered. I told you they would go out and defend it at the drop of a hat. They would defend it to the death. They would go and be martyrs.

But they had lost and apparently had forgotten the beautiful relationship with their God. That was the real *original* reason for their belief and devotion. They forgot why they were fighting. They were fighting by this time for objective truth rather than fighting because they were devoted to a Person, to a Being, a great and awesome and wonderful loving Being that they were to have an intimate relationship with. In a way, you could say that the true religion or the true faith had become a philosophy to them. And that is all. They were fighting for facts. They were fighting for doctrines, not for Jesus Christ. They were fighting to be right and to be seen as right and be on the right side of history, as it were. But they were not fighting to please Him. They were doing it for the wrong

reasons. That is why it is so bad, because they had forgotten Christ, they had forgotten their Savior. They had left their love for Him. They would rather wield a spear or a sword, as it were, than pray to be with their God, just to put it in those forms.

Let us go to verse five. Remember these are the commands He gives.

Revelation 2:5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place— unless you repent."

This is why I said it is so terrible because it is immediately followed by a very terrible penalty if they do not change. He illustrates what had happened to them, their spiritual problem, as a fall from a very high and prestigious position, or state or condition. What He is telling them, instead of growing and becoming better, going on to perfection as we are supposed to do, they had regressed, and they had just about hit bottom. That is why what He says there that it is so important that they listen because He was just about ready to pull the string on their conversion, on their being part of His church. That is what removing the lampstand means—they were *this* close. All the battles they had fought for Him, actually not for Him, fought for truth, had fought for right, had made them scarred, hardened, and marred like grizzled old drill sergeants. And Christ intimates here that He liked them better when they were innocent and yielding and childlike and humble and teachable.

They had been so long in the church fighting in all the sheep wars that they had forgotten the most basic of things. So first they must remember how they were before all the doctrinal wars and all the sheep wars and all the persecutions, and repent, that is, make the change. Do a 180. Do what is right and do the first works, He says. That is, return to basic Christian works, particularly those things that are all about love. The agape love, loving deeds of service toward God and others. The two great commandments: do those first works. Love God with all your heart and love your brethren as yourself. Do those things, go back to those simple things. Stop being so hard and callused that no one can get close to you. Not even your Savior, because you are always looking for dirt. You are always looking for falsehood. You are always looking for the enemy, and you are not able to see what is right in front of you that you really need to do.

He wants them to come home from the sheep wars, stop being so defensive and callused and simply live His way of outgoing concern. That is what they needed to do. What they had done is they had replaced Christian love and service with arguments and fighting and doctrinal disputes, and it made them so callused that they were about on their way out. He had lost a great deal of pleasure in them. He had lost pleasure because their battles had made them forget and forsake the most important parts of Christianity.

So, as we saw, the stakes are very high. He threatens to remove their lampstand, their place in the church if they failed to repent. Talk about salvational issues! This problem that they had was very much a salvational issue because He is threatening to take their salvation away because of their hard, callused, always-fighting attitude. Let us go to verse 6 now.

Revelation 2:6 "But this you have [I guess He thinks that after that very condemnatory verse 5, He needs to pump them up again because He is trying to save them, not crush them.], that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

Now Jesus commends them again. Like I said, He is exhorting them to do right. He is exhorting them to say, "Hey, you have done some things right. I'm not totally against you," and this is one of the things that they need to say, "Yeah, we did that right." But again, it is one of those things where they fought against the enemies, against false teaching, and whatever. It seemed to be right up their alley, but they had done right here. And so He gives them some kudos.

There are some controversy over who the Nicolaitans are. There is two basic schools of thought about them. The first one is that the Nicolaitans were a heretical sect, probably with a lot of Gnostic ideas, that had infiltrated the church and brought in heresies. And they had seen these things, they recognized them and fought against them and pushed them away. I have seen commentaries, commentators who think it was a kind of asceticism: touch not, eat not, do not, whatever. Just be aesthetic.

There are others who say, No, it is not asceticism, that it was hedonism that was brought in from Ephesus. The Diana cult, the emperor cult, what have you. They were saying that you could bring some of these into the church. I think maybe the most cogent argument if we are going to think of them this way, is that the Nicolaitans wanted to syncretize the church with certain facets of Diana worship, that they wanted to bring the world into the church.

Nobody knows, though. They are all speculating because there is really nothing that survives in history about who these specific Nicolaitans were. So Jesus is saying it was good for them to stand up, to keep such things out of the church. Those are good works. We just cannot let them take over our whole lives.

The second school of thought, which is the one I tend to think is right, but I do not know. It is just my personal opinion, but I want to bring it to you here. The other school of thought about these Nicolaitans is that you need to take the name Nicholas literally, that these were people who followed Nicholas. Nicholas means conqueror of the people. *Nico* meaning victory or conquering or overcoming, and *laos* meaning the people—Nicholas. Therefore, the Nicolaitans would be someone who followed Nicholas, who took his name very literally and became those who conquer the people.

What I think this means is that the Ephesians fought church tyrants, abusers of the sheep, those who wanted to rule over the people. Not in the proper way, but to control the people. And in our history in Worldwide Church of God and elsewhere, you know that those were out there, that there were ones who wanted to dictate how to live to everyone, down to the most minuscule detail of their lives. And ultimately, as we have seen from our history, these people, these church tyrants, caused many members to stray from the faith. They lost their faith in the church and then lost their faith in God.

Both of these ideas, that they were just a heretical sect or that they were actual church tyrants, would be in keeping with the Ephesians' seemingly fervent desire to fight heresy and to set the church back on the track. Now Christ is praising them for defending the little ones among the flock by getting rid of the despots and the abusers and the false teachers within the leadership, and that was a good thing. He, like I said, wanted to pump them up a little bit after taking them down. Not just one peg, but many pegs.

If you go back to Ezekiel 34, we will find this is a thing that Christ Himself does. This is the chapter about the evil shepherds. I just want to read part of this. The New King James calls this section "God, the True Shepherd." I am going to start in verse 15, though. And this is what Christ is doing.

Ezekiel 34:15-22 "I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord God. "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment." 'As for you, oh My flock, thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture—and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? And as for My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet." "Therefore thus says the Lord God to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; I will judge between sheep and sheep."

This is why He commends them for such things. Doing this kind of defense of the faith and getting bad leaders and false teachers out of the church is a good thing. It is doing what Christ would do, what He is going to do with Israel when they return. So He gives them a little bit of encouragement and says, "That's fine, but you need to have the right attitude and be doing it for the right reasons." So he says in verse 7 of Revelation 2,

Revelation 2:7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. [Because this happens in a lot of churches, with a lot of people. So we need to understand that if the shoe fits, wear it.] To him who overcomes, I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God."

Now remember I said earlier that each one of these rewards has something to do with the major problem of the church, of this particular group of people. They point to rewards that take place in the New Heavens and the New Earth. Now, the phrasing of this particular reward at the end of verse 7 is in keeping with the major theme of this epistle to the Ephesians. Notice that it recalls the Garden of Eden—the Tree of Life in the paradise of God. So right at the end of this epistle to these people, He is reminding them of Eden, reminding them of the Tree of Life and what it promised, what the reward would be there, what it would do if they took of the Tree of Life. He wants us to recall how Adam and Eve and Christ—the pre-existent Christ or the pre-incarnation Christ—had a relationship, how they interacted with one another, how God gave them instruction. And He helped them and did all kinds of things for them. He married them! He was in a very intimate relationship with them in the presence of the Tree of Life, as it were, and if they had taken of the Tree of Life, rather than the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, how that relationship would have grown.

Do you understand what He is telling them here? He is telling them, "You need to go back to Eden with Me." You need to go back to the time of their intimacy before they took the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That even though they were doing good in defending the church, they had allowed their attitudes to become evil, if only in that they had forsaken Him and gone away from Him and were doing things for all the wrong reasons. But it was still not right and godly. It was that

mixture of good and evil. So He is telling the Ephesians with this reward that they need to return to the kind of ideal relationship that Adam and Eve had with Him before they sinned. And that is ultimately the goal of every Christian. That we all want to return to or have a relationship with our Creator that is pure and holy and good, and full of all the good things that He will gladly supply to us. That is, to live intimately and purely, unashamedly and innocently and harmoniously with Christ forever, having taken of the Tree of Life.

He is telling the Ephesians, if they want to overcome, they need to shake off all that accumulated callousness that they had gotten over the years. They need to remove that defensive shell that they had put around them that made them hard. They need to take off all that battle-tested, soldier-like approach and become new creations again. Just like when Adam and Eve were intimate with Him, they were new creations. He is reminding them that they need to not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of their minds. (Romans 12:2)

Please turn with me to II Peter 1. I think you could see how this applies to the Ephesians in this letter.

II Peter 1:2-7 Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.

Do you see how they may have stopped at some point along this list and failed to move any farther? They got to perseverance, and after that, they stopped. They did not add godliness. They did not add brotherly kindness. They did not add agape love. That is where Christ is telling them, "That's where you need to get!"

II Peter 1:8-11 For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. [They had forgotten what Christ had done for them.] Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble. For so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

That fits very well with these crusty old soldiers of the letter to the Ephesians.

Let us finish here in Revelation 22. The Tree of Life here is mentioned again. I told you there was a correspondence between the rewards and Revelation 21 and 22 and the New Heavens and New Earth.

Revelation 22:12 "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.

The Tree of Life is mentioned right after a blessing on those who do His commandments. Or we could say, as the margin does here, "who do righteousness." Perhaps this is another way of saying what is missing from the Ephesians' lives. They do a whole lot of defending of the faith against false teachers and false doctrines, but they are seriously lacking in *doing righteousness*, doing right things. Oh, they are willing to grab up their spear. But to go and visit the sick or to help somebody through a problem, or what have you—all those acts of righteousness—they are lacking considerably, lagging far behind. They think their bloody sword will gain them entry into the Kingdom of God. But Christ wants to see their love for Him and for the brethren. That is what His eyes on. He does not want a soldier. He wants a child of God.

So he who has an ear, let him hear.