

Ephesus and Us **Revelation 2:1-7**

Each of the seven oracles in Revelation 2-3 has the same seven components (with occasional exception): (1) address, (2) description of Jesus, (3) praise, (4) rebuke, (5) exhortation, (6) call to decision, (7) end-time reward. This structure will largely guide our reflections.

Day 1: Introduction to Revelation 2-3

As we head into this next section of Revelation, two preliminary comments are in order. First, while we often call these seven 'letters', they are not actually in a letter form (though the entire book of Revelation is in the form of a very long letter, with introduction and conclusion typical of letters). Instead, these seven speeches are in the form of prophetic oracles, of the sort we see occasionally in the Old Testament. The use of this form holds an important implication. The closest parallel to this series of seven oracles comes in Amos 1-2, with its eight prophetic oracles. Strikingly, Amos begins by preaching against Israel's neighbors for oppressing the people of God (Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab), but then shockingly preaches against Judah and Israel for similar sins. At the very least, the prophetic oracle form would carry weight with John's readers, familiar with Amos: oracles are serious things. More, it might also conjure up further associations that would compel their attention: the last time God spoke to his people in prophetic oracle, they disregarded him and suffered fierce judgment!

Secondly, while each letter may uniquely fit its recipient's distinctive circumstance, John expects each church to listen to, and learn from, all the letters: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, etc.; similarly, 2:23, "Then *all the churches* will know," *emphasis added*). These messages are applicable not just to the initial recipient, but through his word to them, God speaks to us all.

Day 2: Revelation 2:1 To ... the church in Ephesus

Why does John address the church of Ephesus first? Likely in part because Ephesus was the largest and most significant of the seven cities addressed. It was the administrative capital of the province; roads began there and spread outward. It was the seat of the Roman governor of the province of Asia, a large seaport, and a center of travel and commerce. The city was also the regional center for the imperial cult, with six temples to various deceased emperors and the patron goddess Roma.

The church in Ephesus was also likely the most prominent and developed of the seven. The apostle Paul, while moving quickly in and out of most other cities where he ministered, had settled in Ephesus for two or three years (Acts 18-20). From there, his preaching spread throughout the province (Acts 19:10). Ephesus was also the locus of Timothy's ministry (1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 1:18). Additionally, early Christian tradition reports that the apostle John's later ministry centered there.

There is a lesson for us here. Despite receiving so much apostolic attention, the church in Ephesus was not secure. In his last visit, Paul himself warned, "After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:29-31). Here, Jesus warns: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev 2:5). We too cannot rest on any past glories, or any perceived acceptability with God. We do well as a church – and, of course, as individuals – to assess ourselves periodically, in the light of Scripture, to ascertain whether or not we remain in good standing with Jesus.

Day 3: Revelation 2:1 These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven lampstands. Two features of this verse warrant comment: (1) The phrase 'these are the words of ...' is archaic, no longer common at the time John wrote, but reminiscent of the Old Testament (much as 'thus saith the Lord' today). John uses the phrase seven times; the Old Testament uses it 250 times, especially in the prophets. So it is a claim to authority, in two senses: John claims the mantle of the Old Testament prophets, and Jesus claims the authority of Old Testament YHWH.

(2) The second element in each letter is the description of Jesus. Most of the descriptions recall Revelation 1; several recur later in Revelation 20-22. Three points are noteworthy about this description. First, as the initial letter in the series, this description encompasses the message to all seven churches (not just to the church in Ephesus): seven stars, seven lampstands. Secondly, the description recalls chapter 1 (1:12-13,16,20), and anticipates the warning to the church a few verses later: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (2:5).

Third, and most significant, the description – and the entire oracle – recalls Eden. Jesus *walks* among the lampstands as God *walked* in the garden of Eden (Gen 3:8); the effects of sin and the fall have been reversed in Jesus. At the same time, Jesus threatens to remove their lampstand, as

God removed Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden; the effects of the fall in Eden could recur, if they – or we – turn from God. Yet for those who persist in faith, both them and us, Eden is eternally restored, as the faithful eat from the tree of life in the paradise (garden) of God (2:7).

Day 4: Revelation 2:2-6 What the Ephesian church does right

In each letter, the praise and rebuke section begins the same way: 'I know' (2:2-3, 9, 13, 19: 3:1, 8, 15). Because Jesus walks among them – and among us – he is familiar with how they – and we – are living.

Jesus finds much to praise in the Ephesian church: particularly, their works, their labor, and their perseverance (2:2). Notably, Paul uses these same three words to commend the Thessalonians (1 Thes 1:3). This raises the possibility that the trilogy represents the early Church consensus about what is required of Christians: not just profession of faith, but also good works, hard labor, and persistence in the face of discouragement and opposition. This corrects a common misunderstanding of Christian faith and Scripture, the assumption that faith can stand alone. Orphan faith, insisted Protestant founder, Reformer Martin Luther, is no true faith; true faith leads to works, labor and perseverance.

Beyond works, intolerance is another essential Christian virtue. The church in Ephesus did not tolerate either error or sin. Instead, they rejected false apostles (2:2), and they hated the practices of heretics (2:6), and Jesus praises them for it. We may take such attributes for granted: of course they rejected the lies and wicked practices of *false apostles* and *heretics*. But to do that, they first had to be competent to distinguish truth from lies, and biblical morality from sin. Theological controversy was rampant before the books of the New Testament were canonized, and before the boundaries of orthodox theology were confirmed by the early Church. While both limits have long since existed, false teaching and sinful practice still rear their ugly head. It is not enough to label someone 'evangelical' or to believe something because a Christian author writes it or a famous preacher says it. We, no less than the Ephesians, need to distinguish true teaching from false, and virtue from vice. At a minimum, this requires a modest understanding of Bible and basic Christian theology.

Day 5: Revelation 2:4-5 What the Ephesian church does wrong

They have 'lost their first love'. Perhaps no phrase in these seven oracles has been more abused than this one. Because John does not elaborate what exactly he means by this phrase – apparently he does not need to, because the Ephesian church know – we tend to fill it with our

own meaning. Given the contemporary American concept of love, and the widespread experience of 'new love', we tend to read into the phrase the sort of euphoria that characterizes the initial stages of infatuation, as well as the earliest stage of Christian conversion: 'the dizzy, dancing way you feel, when all your fairy tales come real'. Sociology, though, tells us that this definition of love is relatively recent, and psychology tells us that it is unrealistic and unstable. Experience tells us the same of the initial stage of conversion. Besides, nothing in this text hints that John has in mind either euphoria or emotion. Instead, as the solution, he urges: '*do the things you did at first*'. So, apparently forsaking their first love has more to do with *doing* than with *feeling*.

Another line of evidence points in the same direction. It may be that John need not elaborate, because his first readers would catch the allusion to Jeremiah 2:13, "'My people have committed two sins: They have *forsaken* me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.'" Jeremiah criticizes Israel for *forsaking* God, for turning from exclusive worship of him to worship of Canaanite gods. Against this background, John would be warning the Ephesians not to succumb to threats or persecution and turn from exclusive worship of Jesus to worship also of the emperor.

In short, what John has in view is not the euphoria of falling in love or early conversion, but instead, such gratitude for salvation that issues in devotion, loyalty and obedience to Jesus, even in the face of opposition or persecution. What it says to us is something similar, though stronger because we do not face such a strong disincentive as persecution. Gratitude for our salvation naturally springs forth in devotion, loyalty, and obedience to Jesus. Where these have flagged, they need recovering.

Day 6: Revelation 2:5-7 Conditional Salvation

While God's choice of us for salvation (election) is unconditional, our final salvation is not. John here twice affirms that salvation is conditional: "Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not ... I will ... remove your lampstand" (2:5); "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise [garden] of God" (2:7). What is at stake here is not just some greater or lesser reward in heaven, but eternal salvation or rejection. Is the book of Revelation relevant to us today? It is, if we hope to spend eternity with God, for it sets out some of the conditions necessary to salvation. These conditions do not *earn* or *merit* our salvation; but they are all *necessary* in order to be saved. John urged them to take the issue seriously; we do likewise.