

William Barclay's Daily Study Bible

Revelation 2

THE LETTER TO EPHESUS (Revelation 2:1-7)

2:1-7 To the angel of the Church in Ephesus, write:

These things says he who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. I know your works--I mean your toil and your steadfast endurance, and I know that you cannot bear evil men, and that you have put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and who are not, and have proved them liars. I know that you possess steadfast endurance. I know all that you have borne for my name's sake and I know that you have not been worn out by your efforts. All the same I have this against you--that you have left your first love. Remember, then, whence you have fallen, and repent, and make your conduct such as it was at first. If you do not, I am coming to you, and I will remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent.

But you do possess this virtue--you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I too hate.

Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. I will give to him who overcomes to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.

Ephesus, First And Greatest (Revelation 2:1-7 Continued)

When we know something of the history of Ephesus and learn something of its conditions at this time, it is easy to see why it comes first in the list of the seven Churches.

Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia but Ephesus was by far its greatest city. It claimed as its proud title "The first and the greatest metropolis of Asia." A Roman writer called it Lumen Asiae, The Light of Asia. Let us see, then, the factors which gave it its preeminent greatness.

(i) In the time of John, Ephesus was the greatest harbour in Asia. All the roads of the Cayster Valley--the Cayster was the river on which it stood--converged upon it. But the roads came from further afield than that. It was at Ephesus that the road from the far-off Euphrates and Mesopotamia reached the Mediterranean, having come by way of Colossae and Laodicea. It was at Ephesus that the road from Galatia reached the sea, having come by way of Sardis. And from the south came up the road from the rich Maeander Valley. Strabo, the ancient geographer, called Ephesus "The Market of Asia," and it may well be that in Revelation 18:12-13 John was setting down a description of the varied riches of the marketplace at Ephesus.

Ephesus was the Gateway of Asia. One of its distinctions, laid down by statute, was that when the Roman proconsul came to take up office as governor of Asia, he must disembark at Ephesus and enter his province there. For all the travellers and the trade, from the Cayster and the Maeander Valleys, from Galatia, from the Euphrates and from Mesopotamia, Ephesus was the highway to Rome. In later times, when the Christians were brought from Asia to be flung to the lions in the arena in Rome, Ignatius called Ephesus the Highway of the Martyrs.

Its position made Ephesus the wealthiest and the greatest city in all Asia and it has been aptly called the Vanity Fair of the ancient world.

(ii) Ephesus had certain important political distinctions. It was a free city. In the Roman Empire certain cities were free cities; they had had that honour conferred upon them because of their services to the Empire. A free city was within its own limits self-governing; and it was exempted from ever having Roman troops garrisoned there. It was an assize town. The Roman governors made periodical tours of their provinces; and at certain specially

chosen cities and towns courts were held where the governor tried the most important cases. Further, Ephesus held yearly the most famous games in Asia which attracted people from all over the province.

(iii) Ephesus was the centre of the worship of Artemis or, as the King James Version calls her, Diana of the Ephesians. The Temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was four hundred and twenty-five feet long by two hundred and twenty feet wide; it had one hundred and twenty columns, each sixty feet high and the gift of a king, and thirty-six of them were richly gilded and inlaid. Ancient temples consisted mostly of colonnades with only the centre portion roofed over. The centre portion of the Temple of Artemis was roofed over with cypress wood. The image of Artemis was one of the most sacred images in the ancient world. It was by no means beautiful but a squat, black, many-breasted figure; so ancient that none knew its origin. We have only to read Acts 19:1-41 to see how precious Artemis and her temple were to Ephesus. Ephesus had also famous temples to the godhead of the Roman Emperors, Claudius and Nero, and in after days was to add temples to Hadrian and Severus. In Ephesus pagan religion was at its strongest.

(iv) Ephesus was a notorious centre of pagan superstition. It was famous for the Ephesian Letters, amulets and charms which were supposed to be infallible remedies for sickness, to bring children to those who were childless and to ensure success in any undertaking; and people came from all over the world to buy them.

(v) The population of Ephesus was very mixed. Its citizens were divided into six tribes. One consisted of those who were descendants of the original natives of the country; one consisted of those who were direct descendants of the original colonists from Athens; three consisted of other Greeks; and one, it is probable, consisted of Jews. Besides being a centre of religion the Temple of Artemis was also a centre of crime and immorality. The Temple area possessed the right of asylum; any criminal was safe if he could reach it. The temple possessed hundreds of priestesses who were sacred prostitutes. All this combined to make Ephesus a notoriously evil place. Heraclitus, one of the most famous of ancient philosophers, was known as "the weeping philosopher." His explanation of his tears was that no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at its immorality.

Such was Ephesus; a more unpromising soil for the sowing of the seed of Christianity can scarcely be imagined; and yet it was there that Christianity had some of its greatest triumphs. R. C. Trench writes: "Nowhere did the word of God find a kindlier soil, strike root more deeply or bear fairer fruits of faith and love."

Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than in any other city (Acts 20:31). It was with Ephesus that Timothy was connected so that he is called its first bishop (1 Timothy 1:3). It is in Ephesus that we find Aquila, Priscilla and Apollos (Acts 18:19; Acts 18:24; Acts 18:26). Surely to no one was Paul ever more close than to the Ephesian elders, as his farewell address so beautifully shows (Acts 20:17-38). In later days John was the leading figure of Ephesus. Legend has it that he brought Mary the mother of Jesus to Ephesus and that she was buried there. When Ignatius of Antioch wrote to Ephesus, on his way to being martyred in Rome, he could write: "You were ever of one mind with the apostles in the power of Jesus Christ."

There can be few places which better prove the conquering power of the Christian faith.

We may note one more thing. We have spoken of Ephesus as the greatest harbour of Asia. Today there is little left of Ephesus but ruins and it is no less than six miles from the sea. The coast is now "a harbourless line of sandy beach, unapproachable by a ship." What was once the Gulf of Ephesus and the harbour is "a marsh dense with reeds." It was ever a fight to keep the harbour of Ephesus open because of the silt which the Cayster brings down. The fight was lost and Ephesus vanished from the scene.

Ephesus, Christ And His Church (Revelation 2:1-7 Continued)

John begins the letter to Ephesus with two descriptions of the Risen Christ.

(i) He holds the seven stars in his right hand. That is to say, Christ holds the Churches in his hand. The word for to hold is *kratein* (**Greek #2902**), and it is a strong word. It means that Christ has complete control over the Church. If the Church submits to that control, it will never go wrong; and more than that--our security lies in the

fact that we are in the hand of Christ. "They shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

There is another point here which emerges only in the Greek. *Kratein* (**Greek #2902**) normally takes a genitive case after it (the case which in English we express by the word *of*). Because, when we take hold of a thing, we seldom take hold of the whole of it but of part of it. When *kratein* (**Greek #2902**) takes an accusative after it, it means that the whole object is gripped within the hand. Here, *kratein* (**Greek #2902**) takes the accusative and that means that Christ clasps the whole of the seven stars in his hand. That means he holds the whole Church in his hand.

We do well to remember that. It is not only our Church which is in the hand of Christ; the whole Church is in his hand. When men put up barriers between Church and Church, they do what Christ never does.

(ii) He walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. The lampstands are the Churches. This expression tells us of Christ's unwearied activity in the midst of his Churches. He is not confined to any one of them; wherever men are met to worship in his name, Christ is there.

John goes on to say certain things about the people of the Church of Ephesus.

(i) The Risen Christ praises their toil. The word is *kopos* (**Greek #2884**) and it is a favourite New Testament word. *Tryphena*, *Tryphosa* and *Persis* all work hard in the Lord (Romans 16:12). The one thing that Paul claims is that he has worked harder than all (1 Corinthians 15:10). He fears lest the Galatians slip back, and his labour is in vain (Galatians 4:11). In each case--and there are many others--the word is either *kopos* (**Greek #2884**) or the verb *kopian* (**Greek #2872**). The special characteristic of these words is that they describe the kind of toil which takes everything of mind and sinew that a man can put into it. The Christian way is not for the man who fears to break sweat. The Christian is to be a toiler for Christ, and, even if physical toil is impossible, he can still toil in prayer.

(ii) The Risen Christ praises their steadfast endurance. Here is the word *hupomone* (**Greek #5281**) which we have come upon again and again. It is not the grim patience which resignedly accepts things. It is the courageous gallantry which accepts suffering and hardship and turns them into grace and glory. It is often said that suffering colours life; but when we meet life with the *hupomone* (**Greek #5281**) which Christ can give, the colour of life is never grey or black; it is always tinged with glory.

Ephesus, When Orthodoxy Costs Too Much (Revelation 2:1-7 Continued)

The Risen Christ goes on to praise the Christians of Ephesus because they have tested evil men and proved them liars.

Many an evil man came into the little congregations of the early church. Jesus had warned of the false prophets who are wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). In his farewell speech to the elders of this very Church at Ephesus, Paul had warned them that grievous wolves would invade the flock (Acts 20:29). These evil men were of many kinds. There were emissaries of the Jews who sought to entangle Christians again in the Law and followed Paul everywhere, trying to undo his work. There were those who tried to turn liberty into licence. There were professional beggars who preyed on the charity of the Christian congregations. The Church at Ephesus was even more open to these itinerant menaces than any other Church. It was on the highway to Rome and to the east, and what R. C. Trench called "the whole rabble of evil-doers" was liable to descend upon it.

More than once the New Testament insists on the necessity of testing. John in his First Letter insists that the spirits who claim to come from God should be tested by their willingness to accept the Incarnation in all its fullness (1 John 4:1-3). Paul insists that the Thessalonians should test all things and then hold on to that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). He insists that, when the prophets preach, they are subject to the testing of the other prophets (1 Corinthians 14:29). A man cannot proclaim his private views in the assembly of God's people; he must abide in the tradition of the Church. Jesus demanded the hardest test of all: "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:15-20).

The Church at Ephesus had faithfully applied its tests and had weeded out all evil and misguided men; but the trouble was that something had got lost in the process. "I have this against you," says the Risen Christ, "that you have lost your first love." That phrase may have two meanings.

(a) It can mean that the first enthusiasm is gone. Jeremiah speaks of the devotion of Israel to God in the early days. God says to the nation that he remembers, "the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride" (Jeremiah 2:2). There had been a honeymoon period, but the first flush of enthusiasm is past. It may be that the Risen Christ is saying that all the enthusiasm has gone out of the religion of the Church of Ephesus.

(b) Much more likely this means that the first fine rapture of love for the brotherhood is gone. In the first days the members of the Church at Ephesus had really loved each other; dissension had never reared its head; the heart was ready to kindle and the hand was ready to help. But something had gone wrong. It may well be that heresy-hunting had killed love, and orthodoxy had been achieved at the price of fellowship. When that happens, orthodoxy has cost too much. All the orthodoxy in the world will never take the place of love.

Ephesus, The Steps On The Return Journey (Revelation 2:1-7 Continued)

In Ephesus something had gone wrong. The earnest toil was there; the gallant endurance was there; the unimpeachable orthodoxy was there; but the love was gone. So the Risen Christ makes his appeal and it is for the three steps of the return journey.

(i) First, he says "Remember". He is not here speaking to someone who has never been inside the Church; he is speaking to those who are inside but have somehow lost the way. Memory can often be the first step on the way back. In the far country the prodigal son suddenly remembered his home (Luke 15:17).

O. Henry has a short story. There was a lad who had been brought up in a village; and in the village school he had sat beside a village girl, innocent and sweet. The lad found his way to the city; fell into bad company; became an expert pickpocket. He was on the street one day; he had just picked a pocket--a neat job, well done--and he was pleased with himself. Suddenly he saw the girl he used to sit beside at school. She was still the same--innocent and sweet. She did not see him; he took care of that. But suddenly he remembered what he had been, and realized what he was. He leaned his burning head against the cool iron of a lamp post. "God," he said, "how I hate myself." Memory was offering him the way back.

William Cowper wrote:

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and his word?

A verse like that may sound like nothing but tragedy and sorrow, but in fact it can be the first step of the way back; for the first step to amendment is to realize that something has gone wrong.

(ii) Second, he says "Repent". When we discover that something has gone wrong, there is more than one possible reaction. We may feel that nothing can sustain its first lustre, and so accept what we consider inevitable. We may be filled with a feeling of resentment and blame life instead of facing ourselves. We may decide that the old thrill is to be found along forbidden pathways and try to find spice for life in sin. But the Risen Christ says, "Repent!" Repentance is the admission that the fault is ours and the feeling of sorrow for it. The prodigal's reaction is: "I will arise and go to my father and say I have sinned." (Luke 15:18). It is Saul's cry of the heart when he realizes his folly: "I have played the fool and I have erred exceedingly" (1 Samuel 26:21). The hardest thing about repentance is the acceptance of personal responsibility for our failure, for once the responsibility is accepted the godly sorrow will surely follow.

(iii) Third, he says "Do". The sorrow of repentance is meant to drive a man to two things. First, it is meant to drive him to fling himself on the grace of God, saying only: "God, be merciful to me a sinner." Second, it is meant to drive him to action in order to bring forth fruits meet for repentance. No man has truly repented when he does

the same things again. Fosdick said that the great truth of Christianity is that "no man need stay the way he is." The proof of repentance is a changed life, a life changed by our effort in co-operation with the grace of God.

Ephesus, A Ruinous Heresy (Revelation 2:1-7 Continued)

We meet here a heresy which the Risen Christ says that he hates and which he praises Ephesus for also hating. It may seem strange to attribute hatred to the Risen Christ; but two things are to be remembered. First, if we love anyone with passionate intensity, we will necessarily hate anything which threatens to ruin that person. Second, it is necessary to hate the sin but love the sinner.

The heretics we meet here are the Nicolaitans. They are only named, not defined. But we meet them again in Pergamum (Revelation 2:15). There they are very closely connected with those "who hold the teaching of Balaam," and that in turn is connected with eating things offered to idols and with immorality (Revelation 2:14). We meet precisely the same problem at Thyatira where the wicked Jezebel is said to cause Christians to practise immorality and to eat things offered to idols.

We may first note that this danger is coming not from outside the Church but from inside. The claim of these heretics was that they were not destroying Christianity but presenting an improved version.

We may, second, note that the Nicolaitans and those who hold the teaching of Balaam were, in fact, one and the same. There is a play on words here. The name Nicolaos ([Greek #3532](#)), the founder of the Nicolaitans, could be derived from two Greek words, nikan ([Greek #3528](#)), to conquer, and laos ([Greek #2992](#)), the people. Balaam ([Hebrew #1109](#)) can be derived from two Hebrew words, bela, to conquer, and ha'am ([Hebrew #5971](#)), the people. The two names, then, are the same and both can describe an evil teacher, who has won victory over the people and subjugated them to poisonous heresy.

In Numbers 25:1-5 we find a strange story in which the Israelites were seduced into illegal and sacrilegious unions with Moabite women and into the worship of Baal-peor, a seduction which, if it had not been sternly checked, might have ruined the religion of Israel and destroyed her as a nation. When we go on to Numbers 31:16 we find that seduction definitely attributed to the evil influence of Balaam. Balaam, then, in Hebrew history stood for an evil man who seduced the people into sin.

Let us now see what the early church historians have to tell us about these Nicolaitans. The majority identify them with the followers of Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch, who was one of the seven commonly called deacons (Acts 6:5). The idea is that Nicolaus went wrong and became a heretic. Irenaeus says of the Nicolaitans that "they lived lives of unrestrained indulgence" (Against Heresies, 1.26.3). Hippolytus says that he was one of the seven and that "he departed from correct doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifference of food and life" (Refutation of Heresies, 7: 24). The Apostolic Constitutions (6: 8) describe the Nicolaitans as "shameless in uncleanness." Clement of Alexandria says they "abandon themselves to pleasure like goats...leading a life of self-indulgence." But he acquits Nicolaus of all blame and says that they perverted his saying "that the flesh must be abused." Nicolaus meant that the body must be kept under; the heretics perverted it into meaning that the flesh can be used as shamelessly as a man wishes (The Miscellanies 2: 20). The Nicolaitans obviously taught loose living.

Let us see if we can identify their point of view and their teaching a little more definitely. The letter to Pergamum tells us that they seduced people into eating meat offered to idols and into immorality. When we turn to the decree of the Council of Jerusalem, we find that two of the conditions on which the Gentiles were to be admitted to the Church were that they were to abstain from things offered to idols and from immorality (Acts 15:28-29). These are the very conditions that the Nicolaitans broke.

They were almost certainly people who argued on these lines. (a) The Law is ended; therefore, there are no laws and we are entitled to do what we like. They confused Christian liberty with unchristian licence. They were the very kind of people whom Paul urged not to use their liberty as an opportunity for the flesh (Galatians 5:13). (b) They probably argued that the body is evil anyway and that a man could do what he liked with it because it did not matter. (c) They probably argued that the Christian was so defended by grace that he could do anything and take no harm.

What lay behind this Nicolaitan perversion of the truth? The trouble was the necessary difference between the Christian and the pagan society in which he moved. The heathen had no hesitation in eating meat offered to idols and it was set before him at every social occasion. Could a Christian attend such a feast? The heathen had no idea of chastity and sexual relations outside marriage were accepted as completely normal and brought no shame. Must a Christian be so very different? The Nicolaitans were suggesting that there was no reason why a Christian should not come to terms with the world. Sir William Ramsay describes their teaching thus: "It was an attempt to effect a reasonable compromise with the established usages of the Graeco-Roman society and to retain as many as possible of those usages in the Christian system of life." This teaching naturally affected most the upper classes because they had most to lose if they went all the way with the Christian demand. To John the Nicolaitans were worse than pagans, for they were the enemy within the gates.

The Nicolaitans were not prepared to be different; they were the most dangerous of all heretics from a practical point of view, for, if their teaching had been successful, the world would have changed Christianity and not Christianity the world.

Ephesus, The Great Reward (Revelation 2:1-7 Continued)

Finally, the Risen Christ makes his great promise to those who overcome. In this picture there are two very beautiful conceptions.

(i) There is the conception of the tree of life. This is part of the story of the Garden of Eden; in the midst of the garden there was the tree of life (Genesis 2:9); it was the tree of which Adam was forbidden to eat (Genesis 2:16-17); the tree whose fruit would make a man like God, and for eating which Adam and Eve were driven from Eden (Genesis 3:22-24).

In later Jewish thought the tree came to stand for that which gave man life indeed. Wisdom is a tree of life to them that lay hold of her (Proverbs 3:18); the fruit of the righteous is a tree of life (Proverbs 11:30); hope fulfilled is a tree of life (Proverbs 13:12); a tongue is a tree of life (Proverbs 15:4).

To this is to be added another picture. Adam was first forbidden to eat of the tree of life and then he was barred from the garden so that the tree of life was lost for ever. But it was a regular Jewish conception that, when the Messiah came and the new age dawned, the tree of life would be in the midst of men and those who had been faithful would eat of it. The wise man said: "They that do the things that please thee shall receive the fruit of the tree of immortality" (Ecc 19:19). The rabbis had a picture of the tree of life in paradise. Its boughs overshadowed the whole of paradise; it had five hundred thousand fragrant perfumes and its fruit as many pleasant tastes, every one of them different. The idea was that what Adam had lost the Messiah would restore. To eat of the tree of life means to have all the joys that the faithful conquerors will have when Christ reigns supreme.

(ii) There is the conception of paradise, and the very sound of the word is lovely. It may be that we do not attach any very definite meaning to it but when we study history, we come upon some of the most adventurous thinking the world has ever known.

(a) Originally paradise was a Persian word. Xenophon wrote much about the Persians, and it was he who introduced the word into the Greek language. Originally it meant a pleasure garden. When Xenophon is describing the state in which the Persian king lived, he says that he takes care that, wherever he resides, there are paradises, full of all the good and beautiful things the soil can produce (Xenophon: Oeconomicus, 4: 13). Paradise is a lovely word to describe a thing of serene beauty.

(b) In the Septuagint paradise has two uses. First, it is regularly used for the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:8; Genesis 3:1). Second, it is regularly used of any stately garden. When Isaiah speaks of a garden that has no water, it is the word paradise that is used (Isaiah 1:30). It is the word used when Jeremiah says: "Plant gardens and eat their produce" (Jeremiah 29:5). It is the word used when the preacher says: "I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees" (Ecclesiastes 2:5).

(iii) In early Christian thought the word has a special meaning. In Jewish thought after death the souls of all alike went to Hades, a grey and shadowy place. Early Christian thought conceived of an intermediate state between

earth and heaven to which all men went and in which they remained until the final judgment. This place was conceived of by Tertullian as a vast cavern beneath the earth. But there was a special part in which the patriarchs and the prophets lived, and that was paradise. Philo describes it as a place "vexed by neither rain, nor snow, nor waves, but which the gentle Zephyr refreshes, breathing ever on it from the ocean." As Tertullian saw it, only one kind of person went straight to this paradise, and that was the martyr. "The sole key," he said, "to unlock paradise is your own life's blood" (Tertullian: Concerning the Soul, 55).

Origen was one of the most adventurous thinkers the Church ever produced. He writes like this: "I think that all the saints (saints means Christians) who depart from this life will remain in some place situated on the earth, which holy Scripture calls paradise, as in some place of instruction and, so to speak, class-room or school of souls.... If anyone indeed be pure in heart and holy in mind, and more practised in perception, he will by making more rapid progress, quickly ascend to a place in the air, and reach the kingdom of heaven, through these mansions (stages) which the Greeks called spheres and which holy Scripture calls heavens.... He will in the end follow him who has passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, who said: 'I will that where I am, these may be also.' It is of this diversity of places he speaks, when he said: 'In my Father's house are many mansions'" (Origen: De Principiis, 2: 6).

The great early thinkers did not identify paradise and heaven; paradise was the intermediate stage, where the souls of the righteous were fitted to enter the presence of God. There is something very lovely here. Who has not felt that the leap from earth to heaven is too great for one step and that there is need of a gradual entering into the presence of God? May it have been of this that Charles Wesley was thinking when he sang:

Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

(iv) In the end in Christian thought paradise did not retain this idea of an intermediate state. It came to be equivalent to heaven. Our minds must turn to the words of Jesus to the dying and penitent thief: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). We are in the presence of mysteries about which it would be irreverent to dogmatize; but is there any better definition of paradise than to say that it is life for ever in the presence of our Lord?

When death these mortal eyes shall seal,
And still this throbbing heart,
The rending veil shall thee reveal
All glorious as thou art--

and that is paradise.

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