

The Church at Ephesus

by Alex Wiseman

The Lord's message to the assembly at Ephesus is to remember and repent and return to their first love, or else he will come and remove their lampstand.

Duration: 42:42

Scripture: Revelation 1:19 - 2:1

Topics: "Ephesus"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the book of Revelation and its division into three parts: the things which have been seen, the things which are, and the things which shall be. The speaker emphasizes that we are currently in a morally dark world and as believers, we have a responsibility to be lightbearers. The sermon then focuses on the letter to the church in Ephesus, highlighting the Lord's character, his message to the church, and his promise to the overcomers. The speaker emphasizes the importance of understanding that the Lord sees and knows our works, and encourages authenticity and sincerity in our faith.

Transcript

Now shall we read from the book of the Revelation, please, and chapter two. The book of the Revelation and chapter two, verse one. Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write, These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil, and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles and are not, and hast found them liars, and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first lamp. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent unto the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy lampstand out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the also hate.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of my God. Now we trust that the Lord will help us in our meditation together today.

You will already perhaps have observed that this book of the Revelation, I believe possibly in its entirety, was sent to those seven churches in Asia Minor with a message direct from the Lord himself. The book is divided into three distinct parts. I suggest the Spirit of God gives us the clue to that division in verse 19 of chapter one, where, remember, the words are recorded, write the things which thou hast seen that would encompass chapter one, and the things which are that would encompass chapters two and three, and the things which shall be asked of these present things that would encompass chapter four to the end.

The very fact that chapter one uncloses and chapter two opens with such symbols as stars and lampstands indicate to us that in these chapters we are dealing with night conditions. It's a night scene that is presented to us. But we thank God that when we come to the end of the book that night scene has been replaced by a morning, which in turn is replaced by a day that knows no night.

Dear fellow believer, today we are morally in the scene of the world's darkness. Corporately and individually we are set as lightbearers, and we have a responsibility in that direction. But we wait and we look for one who says, I am the bright and the morning star.

And when he appears, when we shall be gathered to him, we shall pass out of the scene of the world's darkness into the celestial light of his divine presence. But it is good to think this morning of how the Spirit of God intends us to behave, and what the Spirit of God intends us to be in this interim, before that moment comes when he shall himself descend from heaven with a shout. You will observe too, perhaps by way of introduction I might say this, you will also observe that in each of these seven letters we have the expression, He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches.

I take it that that would imply to our hearts that throughout the whole of this present dispensation the Spirit of God is speaking, and his voice is as clear and as fresh today as it was when the church of Ephesus existed. This morning as we open the word of God together, it is a good exercise for every heart to recall that the Spirit is speaking to the churches, and he is demanding our attention, and he is demanding a knee. Perhaps it is unnecessary to remind you, but I will remind you, that we may look at these seven letters in three specific ways.

First of all, we may look at them historically, for there is no doubt that these seven churches actually existed at that particular time. But I suggest they were not the only churches in Asia at that time. There is no mention here, for instance, of Colossae.

There is no mention of Hierapolis. But the Spirit of God has been selective, and he has produced characteristics that were there seen in seven representative assemblies to impress upon our hearts, and to write indelibly on the page of Holy Scriptures the kind of pattern that he sees throughout the church age. That leads me to the second point, and that is that there is little doubt that it is the mind of God that we should look at these seven churches not only historically, but we should look at them prophetically.

And when we look at them prophetically, we cannot but understand that there is a pattern of general decline. It moves from Ephesus on the one hand, down to Laodicea on the other. I know that there are high spots.

I know that we have assemblies such as Philadelphia and Smyrna. But generally speaking, the pattern is a pattern of decline. The gold is becoming dim.

And dear fellow, believe it today, we must not be complacent about conditions in 1986 any more than we were in 1985. There is a great need for us to hear again the voice of the Spirit of God, and to recapture the things which he loves, and to avoid the things which he hates. Of course, one of the great problems in this is to assess and appreciate our condition under the eye of God.

It's very easy, of course, to look at the assembly next door. It's very easy to look at the people of God across the way, and to rest upon that. If we are perhaps just a nose ahead, we think, well, we're fine.

But when we come to Revelation 2, the assembly is not under the scrutiny of men. It is under the scrutiny of one whose eyes are as a flame of fire, and who neither slumbers nor sleeps. So, we look at them historically.

We look at them prophetically, but we may look at them practically. And that's what I would like to do in the time at my disposal today. It is not without significance, I suggest, that the first of these letters is addressed to the assembly at Ephesus.

Ephesus, of course, means desirable, and Ephesus was that. I suppose it was about A.D. 56, when Paul comes to Ephesus, the record in Acts chapter 19, and there he sees a work for God established. Four years later, he gathered the elders of Ephesus together, and he reminds them that for three years he had not ceased to warn them night and day with tears.

Four years after that, he sends the Ephesian letter. A few years after that, he sends the letter to Timothy, and they all find their way into the Ephesus assembly. And some thirty years later, by the hand of the apostle John, this short, brief, yet necessary epistle finds its way to the assembly at Ephesus.

So, we see the amount of privilege that this assembly had. Paul had been there, Apollos had been there, Priscilla and Aquila were there, Timothy was there, and so on. You can almost feel the very warmth of the heart of God towards this assembly, based in the midst of idolatry, having to move in the very proximity of the great temple of Diana of the Ephesians.

And yet it is of this little company at Ephesus that the words are recorded, the church of God, which he hath purchased with the blood of his own. As God assessed the work at Ephesus, and the value of that company to his own heart, he guarded it jealously for himself. It reminds me of the condition of the heart of the apostle with regard to the Corinthian assembly.

Remember, in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, I think it is. He says, I am jealous over you, with godly jealousy. For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you a chaste virgin to Christ.

And yet he hides the feeling and the fear of his heart. He says, I fear less by any means. The serpent who beguiled Eve through his subtle death may seduce your minds away from the simplicity that is in Christ.

So that on the one hand we have the depth of his feeling, jealous with godly jealousy. On the other hand we have the fear of his heart, lest it should be seduced away from the simplicity that is in Christ. Dear fellow believer, I am going to suggest to you that that language that was applied to the assembly of Corinth might well be written over the assembly at Ephesus as we see this letter sent to them.

We think too of the word of Jeremiah with regard to the nation of Israel, because this isn't something which is entirely new. This is really history repeating itself. And remember the prophet there, as he writes chapter two, he says, I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, and the love of thine espousals, when thou

wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.

He looks back to the days of their pristine glory. He looks back to the days of their newfound affection, and with a sense of grief he remembers that which belonged to a former day. So it is, I suggest, with regard to the church at Ephesus.

We notice that the letter is not addressed directly to the saints, as is the epistle, it is directed to the angel of the church at Ephesus. I just suggest in passing that here we are dealing with symbolic language, and that raised within the assembly at Ephesus, a body who is charged with the responsibility of the assembly's conduct and their well-being. That is a serious matter.

It is a serious matter to take up the responsibility for the care and the government and of the well-being of a local assembly. None of us should do it lightly, and all of us should do it in the fear of God, knowing that we exercise that work as those that must give account. Now having said all that, by way of background really, I want to look at the letter in three parts.

You'll observe that first of all, the Lord exhibits himself according to the character which he is displayed in, in the previous chapter. Here it is the one that holds the seventh star in his right hand. Secondly, we have the Lord's message to the assembly that we have in verses two to six.

And thirdly, we have the Lord's promise to the overcomer that we have in verse seven. So we have the revelation of the Lord's character, we have the delivery of the Lord's message, and thirdly, we have the promise of the Lord to those that would overcome. In verse fourteen of chapter one, the sixteen I should say of chapter one, you will see that the Lord is presented as having in his right hand seven stars.

That is, he has them as his possession. When we come to chapter two, he moves on a little bit from that, for not only does he say that he has them, in chapter two he says that he holds them. That is, I suggest, that not only do they belong to him, but these stars are under his divine control.

They are accountable to him. That takes us to the thought of overseership as in Peter's epistle. For he reminds us that the heritage belongs to God.

It is his heritage. And those who exercise overseership exercise that overseership under his divine control. But furthermore, I am going to suggest to you, brethren, that in this expression we probably have the idea of being upheld and strengthened for the difficulties of the way.

After all, he has assured us, has he not, that no man goes to war at his own charges. And if he has entrusted the work, he will give the enabling and the strength to his people to see that work through. And so that body, that governing body, that responsible body, is seen as being in the right hand of the risen Lord.

That's good, you know, for John had already known something of the touch and of the feel of that hand. Remember the experience of the previous chapter? When I saw him, I fell at his feet of death. But he laid his right hand upon me and said, Fear not, I am the first and the last.

Brethren and sisters alike today, how good it is to think that the hand of the risen Christ is upon us, to comfort and to sustain and to uphold and to control. And if we allow ourselves to rest there, I tell you this morning, all will be well, whether young or old, whether brethren or sisters. We need to recognize the omnipotence and the sovereignty of the hand of Christ.

That's where they are. That's how he presents himself. And then you will notice that he is seen as walking in the midst of the seven lampstands.

That is perhaps a somewhat unusual expression. It is certainly unusual in the light of the Ephesian letter. For in that letter he is seen as having been seated.

And furthermore, the saints are seen as having been seated with him. But now he is seen as walking in the midst of the assemblies. In other words, it is a judicial scene.

He is estimating. He is assessing. He is taking things into account.

He is exercising a judicial role. Remember in chapter one, his feet are as varnished brass. And those feet of varnished brass are now moving amongst the assemblies.

And he is assessing the true condition of each assembly as it appears to the eye of a righteous judge. So that's his character. Now I want you to look at the message.

Point number one. He says, I know thy works. The assessment is personal.

It is factual. It is absolute. There is no impartiality here.

No error of judgment here. His eyes are as a flame of fire. He moves as a righteous judge, and he says, I know thy works.

Ah, brethren, if we could but grasp the spirit of that. If this morning we could appreciate that his eye is upon us, there would be no room for pretense. There would be no room for hypocrisy.

Only for reality. For nothing is hid from his all-seeing eye. It's not the estimate of the brethren now.

They only look on the surface. They only see the activity. They only see the movement.

But as Jesse discovered on a past dispensation, the Lord seeth not as man seeth. For man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh upon the heart. And it's not the external, brethren.

And it's not the exterior. And it's not the trappings. The Lord is concerned with what is within.

He's concerned with what is in the heart of the thing, whether it be the collective or the individual. And thus he looks at the assembly, the beloved assembly at Ephesus, and he says to them, I know thy works. Now at first sight, this assembly had nothing to be ashamed of.

And we ought to recognize that. There was diligence there. Look at it.

Thy works and thy toil and thy endurance. There was diligence. And would to God there was more diligence amongst the people of God today.

For one of the great problems of a materialistic age is lethargy in relation to the things of God. There was no lethargy in the assembly at Ephesus. Furthermore, you will observe that they were endued with a spirit of discernment as to what was right and what was wrong.

They kept the doors at Ephesus. They could not endure evil. They put men under the microscope of the scrutiny.

They rejected those that were found to be untrue to the faith. And perhaps you would agree with me today that perhaps in the assembly of God's people we could do with a little more discernment in our dealings with God and with the people of God. Discernment marked the assembly at Ephesus.

And furthermore, they were marked by a spirit of determination. That verse 3, let's have a look at it. Thou hast borne and hast patience and for my name's sake hast laboured and hast not grown weary.

In the face of opposition and in the face of difficulties, what the Lord is saying is that they had laboured to the point of weariness, and yet they had not become weary in the work of God. That's good, isn't it? Diligence, discernment, and determination. Now, I want you to notice something perhaps that we tend to overlook in this passage.

And that is that their motive was not called into question. Look again at verse 3, brethren, and you will discover that what they were doing, they were doing for him. It was for my name's sake.

That's interesting, isn't it? We might have thought they were doing it for self. We might have thought they were doing it for the praise of man. But the Lord, true to his character, he acknowledges that what they were doing, they were doing for him.

I wonder if, as the people of God today, we are marked by that kind of diligence. The problem was, you see, there was no lack of activity. There was no lack of appreciation.

But what the assembly at Ephesus lacked at this point in time was affection for Christ. I have this against thee, he says, that thou hast left thy first love. They had allowed themselves to relax.

They had allowed themselves to let go of that first, primary, chief love for Christ. And they had become content to go through a mechanical process that was not generated from a heart that was beating with servant love to him. And that, brethren, was the basis and the only basis of the Lord's complaint to the assembly at Ephesus at this particular time.

I come to you this morning with a conviction and with a burden that what was true of Ephesus in 1890 is true of the majority of those that profess his name today. Remember when that first letter to Timothy was sent to this very assembly, he says, To them take heed unto thyself and to the doctrine. And it may be with Ephesus and indeed with us that we have put a greater emphasis on the doctrine than we have upon the hearts from which the doctrine flows.

The Spirit of God would speak to us today, and he would say to us not only to take heed to the doctrine, but he would say, take heed to thyself. Now, the Lord was talking. He was speaking against a background of experience, if I could put it that way.

For when we come to the close of the old economy, we are in precisely the same kind of situation as we are here. Here with the nation, the words are flowing from the pen of the prophet Malachi. God is speaking to the heart of the people, and he says, I have loved you.

I have loved you. And I understand that the force of it is, I have, and I do, and I will. It's a continuous affection from the heart of God.

And yet, ye say, wherein hast thou loved us? Brethren, that was the burden of Malachi's message. And from that question there flows all the corruption and profanity and emptiness of Israel's religion, so much

so that God desired that someone would rise and close the doors of the house that they offer not infants upon his altar in vain. If the heart was wrong, nothing else could be right.

And the problem at Ephesus was going to become the problem at Thyatira, and ultimately the problem at Laodicea. You see, we open that prophecy of Malachi. We only go on a chapter, and the people are saying, behold, what a weariness it is.

It was an empty, hypocritical, mechanical process that meant nothing to God and nothing to man, and it became a weariness to the people. Brethren and sisters, today I'm going to suggest to you that all degeneration begins in the deep recesses of the heart into which no human eye can penetrate except the eye of Christ. He sees not only what is there, but he sees its potential, and he recognizes that the assembly that has lost its first love today will be playing the harlot with the world tomorrow.

That's what we have in Thyatira. And therefore in faithfulness, and yet with deep affection, the Lord says to the assembly, I have this against thee, that thou hast lost thy first love. I wonder, brethren, sisters, today, if the Lord were to audibly speak to these hearts of ours this morning, would he be saying to us what he says to Ephesus so long ago? And he sums up his message basically in three words, thus five.

He says, remember and repent and return, or else I will come unto thee and remove thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent, solemn, serpent, but true. Now, I don't want to be unduly pessimistic. I do want to be faithful.

I'm going to suggest, brethren and sisters, that this is not a question really of writing off the assembly. It is not really a question of removing the lampstand. The message to Ephesus is really an appeal for the recovery and an appeal for the return.

Of course, divine justice demands that unless they serve the purpose for which they were placed there, there is really little point in the lampstand continuing. And unless where we are placed there is an effective, living, valid witness for God out of hearts that be true to him, then it is nothing more than an empty profession. Thus the appeal of the risen Christ, remember and repent and return.

I'm not going to get into the technicalities of verse six, at least not in five minutes. That's perhaps a good excuse not for getting into it. But let me say this, brethren, that it seems to me that the early church had two great problems to encounter.

One was the problem of legalism as represented in Judaizing teachers. And right up through the epistles we have the influence of those Judaizers infiltrating the assemblies and seeking to perpetuate that which God had fulfilled and set aside. On the other hand, there was the problem of liberalism as represented in those who turned the grace of God into lasciviousness.

And this is probably what we have in the Nicolaitan doctrine under these in chapter two. And it's commendable that the assembly hated in this respect what Christ hated. It's not sufficient.

It's good, but it's not sufficient. We need not only to hate what he hates, but we need to love what he loves. And you know, perhaps that is more difficult.

But the assembly are commended for that and for their attitude to this liberal permissive attitude that is going to be to the detriment of the assembly and its testimony. And then briefly, we have the appeal, verse seven, to hear. And we have the promise to those who will overcome.

First of all, I want you to observe that although this letter is written to an assembly, an assembly that actually existed and worked, toiled for God, when he comes to the appeal it is not to the assembly as such. It is to the individual. See that? He that hath an ear, let him hear.

There is little point in me today speaking to a mass of people. Really, we've got to break the thing down because every assembly is comprised of individuals. And what the individual is, the assembly is, really, in the last analysis.

And thus the Spirit of God, when he comes close to us, verse seven, he doesn't say, they that have an ear. He says, he that hath an ear. Could I speak to an individual this morning, just an individual here and there, a brother, a sister? Are you willing today to give your ear to the voice of the Spirit, the Word of God, and to listen to his appeal, even to his complaint, that the assembly may be rejuvenated, rededicated, and return to that first love and the first works? Secondly, and with this I'm going to close, I want you to notice that in each of these assemblies the Lord assumes that there will always be overcomers.

You get that in Ephesus? You get it right through. And even in Laodicean conditions he appeals to overcomers. So today we don't have to succumb to the conditions around us.

We don't have to go with the stream. In the midst of departure, in the midst of declension, and in the day of falling away, the Lord always anticipates that there will be a remnant who, on the principle of faith, will overcome. And those overcomers will be amply and abundantly compensated.

May the Lord bless to our hearts his Word.

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