

Date: February 20, 2022

Series: *Body-Building Lessons from the Seven Churches*

Title: *Ephesus*

Text: Revelation 1:1 – 2:7

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Everyday about 2pm our mail man delivers our mail. It usually includes things like this---and this---and this---JUNK mail. And when I walk back in the house, I always stop at our recycling bin and drop all that junk mail in there.

Our daily mail also includes stuff like this: BILLS. I want to put them in the recycling bin too---but of course you can't do that. So, I reluctantly carry them in the house to pay.

But sometimes when I open the mailbox, I see something like this: REAL MAIL---written by a REAL person---with a REAL stamp and everything. REAL mail is wonderful---it's increasingly rare in this digital age.

I share all this because for the next seven weeks we're going to be opening REAL MAIL every week—one REAL LETTER every Sunday and I'm referring to the letters Jesus wrote the Seven Churches of Revelation. As we study these REAL letters, I want us to look for lessons we can learn to help fulfill this year's vision--to BUILD UP the BODY OF CHRIST at REDLAND.

By the way, I don't know if you realize this, but the entire book of Revelation is a LETTER written to these seven churches. Unfortunately, many of us don't know that because we treat the book of Revelation, we treat this "letter," the same way we treat the junk mail we get so much of--in that we tend to put this letter aside and leave it "unopened" and unread.

The reason many believers do this is because Revelation is so hard to understand.

John Stott writes, *"Many Christians shy [away from] the Book of Revelation. It seems incomprehensible to them. When they read from its pages they step into a strange unfamiliar world of angels and demons, lambs, lions, horses, and dragons—[a world in which] seals are broken, trumpets blown---and the contents of seven bowls poured out on the earth."*

And this attitude about this particular book of the Bible is not new.

- In the 5th century, St. Jerome complained that the Revelation contained as many RIDDLES as it does WORDS.
- In the 16th century Martin Luther said the book of Revelation should be banished from the pages of the New Testament.
- Another anonymous scholar put it this way, *"The book of Revelation either FINDS a man mad or LEAVES him so."*

But we mustn't make the mistake of so many believers who have thrown this letter in the "recycle bin." After all, it is as much the inspired Word of God as are the four Gospels. In fact, if you look at the third verse of this letter, you'll see that God promises a special BLESSING to the person who reads its words. And at the end of this letter there is a WARNING to anyone who dares tamper with its message either by adding to it or taking from it (22:18-19).

So, this is mail we definitely need to open and read.

With that in mind, open your Bibles or aps to the last book of the Bible. Our text is Revelation 1:1 – 2:7 but in the interest of time, I'm only going to begin reading at verse 9. If able please stand in respect for God's Word as it's read.

Revelation 1:9-20

9 – I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus was on the island of Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

10 – On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,

11 – which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

12 – I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands,

13 – and among the lampstands was someone “like a Son of Man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet and with a golden sash around His chest.

14 – His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes were like blazing fire.

15 – His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of rushing waters.

16 – In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

17 – When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.

18 – I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

19 – Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.

20 – The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in My right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Revelation 2:1-7

1 – To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of Him Who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands:

2 – I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

3 – You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name and have not grown weary.

4 – Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

5 – Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

6 – But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 – He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

The AUTHOR God used to write this letter is the Apostle John and he tells us in verse 9 that he received this letter from God in the form of visions--visions that came to him while he was on the lonely island of Patmos which, as you can see on this map, lies just off the coast of modern-day Turkey.

You may remember that according to tradition John was banished to this tiny island to work in its marble quarries by the Roman emperor, Titus Flavius Diocletian in 94AD. Diocletian is infamous for the systematical way in which he persecuted Christians in the last few years of the 1st century. In fact, John wasn't released until two years later when Diocletian died.

Diocletian put John there because this wicked emperor demanded that he be worshiped as “Lord and God,” and like many believers of that day John refused. But John did more than refuse to worship Diocletian. As John tells us in verse 9, he continued to preach the Gospel truth that JESUS was Lord and God—Savior of the world.

Now as I said, one of the reasons this letter is so perplexing is the fact that it is full of mysterious SYMBOLS—and we find three of them right here in the beginning. Let's “decode” them so we'll be on the same sheet of music from the onset.

a. First, there are SEVEN LAMPSTANDS.

In verse 20 of chapter 1 we are told that these lampstands represent the seven CHURCHES---the body of believers at: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

b. Then in verse 13, there is Someone “Like a Son of Man.”

This of course is Jesus—and the only part of His description that is hard to decipher—is the SWORD that comes from His mouth as He speaks, dictating this letter. So, what does it symbolize? This Sword represents absolute TRUTH—TRUTH that reveals—in the same way a sword can literally lay you open.

I'm reminded of a portion of another letter in the Bible—the book of Hebrews—where it says,
“For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow---it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to Whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Now, I want you to be sure and note that according to chapter 2 Jesus WALKS IN THE MIDST of the lampstands—in the midst of these churches. The word for ***“walks”*** in verse 1 is a verb of CONTINUOUS ACTION which should remind us that Jesus is always among us—always with us—just as He promised. Jesus is with us as a church whenever we do His work, whether that involves serving for Him here by serving as a deacon or teaching a grace group or working on a committee. Or when we go out there sharing His love in our communities, and schools, and workplaces. Jesus is always with us.

That’s what He promised. Remember? ***“Wherever two or three come together in My name—I am there with them.”*** (Matthew 18:20)

Please note something else. This portion of the letter tells us how Jesus feels about the church. He LOVES it! Churches like Redland are near and dear to His heart. Remember—He died for the church. It’s the only institution Jesus founded so He’s always in its midst!

c. The third symbol we find are those SEVEN STARS.

Jesus tells us that these “stars” are His “angels” — which literally means “messengers” but in this text it refers to the PASTORS of those seven churches, the individuals who deliver God’s messages to each congregation.

I take personal comfort in this part of the letter because it says that Jesus holds His messengers in the palm of His hand. And the verb for “hold” here is a strong verb in the accusative case. In other words, it means He’s holding ALL OF ME in His hand. Jesus doesn’t just hold my hand or have his arm around my shoulder. No—He holds ALL OF ME in the palm of His hand and that’s a great place to be!

Now, there are a couple ways of interpreting these seven letters. Some say they were written only to these seven literal churches--seven bodies of believers that existed in John’s day. Others say that they are not meant for literal churches but for ALL churches down through the ages--including the present day.

I agree with both viewpoints.

I believe these were letters written to 7 real churches—but I also believe the principles and precepts within are intended for all churches including Redland.

MY POINT IS THIS IS MAIL THAT WE WERE INTENDED TO READ.

I believe the principles and precepts in these words were written for us to read just as much as they were to the seven churches of John’s day. Think of them as email—that was written to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—but it was intended to be FORWARDED to all other churches as well.

SPEAKING OF THAT—HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY JESUS SEND A LETTER TO THESE PARTICULAR SEVEN CHURCHES?

I mean, there were lots of other congregations in John’s day. For that matter, if it was intended for ALL churches—why address it to any one church?

A.) **One answer is to say that these seven churches would be the FIRST to read these letters because they were CENTRALLY LOCATED.**

Remember, back then each letter had to be hand-written so it made sense to send them to a church from which it could be easily circulated to other surrounding congregations. You'll note that these churches form an irregular circle and are listed in the order in which a messenger might visit them if commissioned to deliver the letters. And you would start with Ephesus, as John does, because it is the church closest to Patmos. Plus, it would have been the port where a letter from Patmos would have first arrived.

B.) **But the main reason for doing it this way was because of the SYMBOLISM of the number 7.**

You see, the people of John's day regarded SEVEN as the perfect number—a number that stood for completeness. So, to write to SEVEN churches was a way of saying that this letter was intended for the entire church—the complete church—a church made up of every single local body of believers down through the ages—including REDLAND BAPTIST CHURCH.

Today we are starting at the beginning with the letter to the church at Ephesus but before we dive into it let's review some facts about this city. I say "review" because last year we studied the founding of this church as a part of our study of the book of Acts. So as you may remember, Ephesus was one of the main urban centers of the Roman Empire. But it was also a gathering place for false religious cults. The Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the world, was in Ephesus. Acts 19 tells us that when Paul, founded this church, he caused a riot because his preaching against false gods led to a drop in sales of silver models of Diana's temple.

This temple was also a SANCTUARY for criminals. Any criminal who had committed any crime was safe if he could reach its steps. And if that weren't bad enough, within its campus were hundreds of priestesses who were sacred prostitutes—so you can imagine the immorality that came from this corrupt combination.

Suffice it to say that Ephesus was a notoriously EVIL place. In fact, one of its more prominent residents, Heraclitis was known as, *"the weeping philosopher."* He explained his tears by saying that, *"...no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at the immorality which he must see on every side."*

Now, you would think that a city full of pagan worship and wanton immorality, you would think this would be fallow ground indeed in which to plant a church, but God grew an amazingly fruitful body of believers there. Billy Graham said it was a church known throughout the empire for its fervor and faith—a church that grew to 50,000 members. By the time of the writing of the book of Revelation it would have been 40 years old. And during those four decades it had great PASTORS—Paul, Timothy, and the Apostle John himself. Can you imagine the preaching those people heard each week!?

This church also had some famous MEMBERS including Aquila, Pricilla, and Apollos. Tradition says that John brought Mary, the mother of Jesus, to live in Ephesus and that she is buried there.

So, the church at Ephesus was a GREAT church and let that remind you that nothing can stand in the way of the Gospel. I mean, in many ways the crumbling morality of OUR culture makes me feel at times like we're living and ministering in Ephesus—so, when you and I get discouraged about laws that legalize immorality, when the news makes us feel overwhelmed by evil, we should look to the example of this church and be reminded that with God's indwelling power—with Jesus walking in our midst—nothing can stand in our way! God can use us anywhere!

Now, in each of these letters Jesus follows the same basic OUTLINE.

1.) **He begins by COMMENDING the church.**

a. **He commends the Ephesians because they were known as HARD WORKERS.**

This is indeed a commendable thing—something that SHOULD be able to be said about every church. Dr. Ralph Grant says, *"Work is the secret of success in the church...it is as religious to WORK in the church as it is to WORSHIP."* And I

would agree. As Jesus said in John 9:4, ***“As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him Who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”***

This is a good time for us to stop and examine ourselves by pondering this question: *“Am I working HARD for kingdom purposes?” “Is there a work in this church that God has gifted me to do?” “Am I doing my part here?”*

Herschel Ford used to say that there are three kinds of people in every church.

- *“There are the SHIRKERS, who never do anything for the Lord.”*
These believers just warm the pew, content to let the other members do the working and praying and giving.
- *“Then there are the JERKERS.”*
These people are like old junk cars that start fine—but then give a jerk and stop. These members start working at first but then they become indifferent and can’t be counted on.
- *“Finally, there are the WORKERS.”*
These are the believers who usually make up 20% of the church but do 80% of the work. These are the believers that pastors THANK GOD for because we know we can count on them to do the work that is needed. Here at Redland, I believe our percentage of workers is much higher than 20%—the question is—are you part of that WORKING percentage?

Well, Ephesus was not a typical church because, like Redland it was FULL of workers—members who worked hard—labored sacrificially for kingdom purposes, men and women of whom Jesus said, ***“I know your toil...and the accomplishments that have come as a result of it. Way to go!”***

b. The other thing Jesus commended the Ephesians for was their PERSEVERANCE.

As I said a moment ago, they served a community where pagan worship and wanton immorality was a way of life—a career for many—but the Christians in that church still lived Godly lives.

Plus, they ministered in a time when Christians were being systematically persecuted—but they didn’t give up. They persevered. They continued to worship and serve and witness for Jesus.

They stood up against false teachers like the Nicolaitians who advocated the political correctness of compromise—“Christians” who said you could serve Christ and still take part in the pagan practices of that culture. The Ephesian Christians didn’t put up with that. They HELD FAST to their faith. Perhaps their example is what the author of Hebrews was thinking of when he wrote in Hebrews 12:1, ***“...let us run with PERSEVERANCE the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus the Author and Perfecter of our faith.”***

I’m reminded of the story of a 104-year-old man who was interviewed by a newspaper reporter. The reporter asked, *“How did you do it sir? How have you lived SO LONG?”* The centenarian answered, *“I ate the right food, got plenty of sleep each night, didn’t fool around, and never indulged in alcohol, smokes, or chewin’ tobacco.”* The reporter replied, *“I had an uncle who lived like that but HE died at fifty-five. Can you explain that?”* “Sure,” the old man replied, *“He just didn’t keep it up LONG enough.”*

Well, unlike the Ephesians many times we don’t keep up living for Christ. Oh, we go through times when we are serious about our purposes: discipleship, ministry, worship, evangelism and fellowship. But before long we those things are put on the back burner. We don’t persevere. And before you know it, our morals reflect our culture more than they do our Christ. Of course, this has a devastating effect on our attempts to lead people to Jesus.

Well, we can learn from this letter that if we want to point people to Jesus Christ—if we want to prove to them that Jesus is worth following—then we must persevere. We must live for Jesus Christ day in and day out. We must live for Christ when the stocks are up and when the stocks are crashing, when we’re employed and when we’re unemployed. We must live for Christ when unexpected tragedy takes our breath away. We must live for Christ when doing so sets us up for ridicule and scorn. Perseverance—clinging to Jesus because you KNOW He is Who He said He is—the only Way—

the only Truth—the only Life—living out our faith no matter what comes—this will have a profound influence on people whose lives you’re trying to impact.

Well, are you doing that? Would Jesus COMMEND YOU for your perseverance?

Do you remember how Ephesian pastor number one (Paul) advised Ephesian pastor number two? Paul said to Timothy, ***“...be prepared [to live for Christ] in season and out of season. Watch your life and doctrine closely. PERSEVERE in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”*** (1 Timothy 4:16, 2 Timothy 4:2)

So, the First Baptist Church of Ephesus was a great church—a commendable church. But unfortunately, it wasn’t a perfect church. Like all bodies of believers, this church had its faults and Jesus pointed out their greatest fault in the next part of the outline of His letter.

2.) The church was CRITICIZED.

a. Ephesus---because they had lost their first LOVE.

Basically, Jesus said, ***“You are decent, hardworking; you persevere and stand against evil—but you no longer love Me—or each other—as you first did.”*** The Ephesians did all the RIGHT things—but LOVE was lacking.

I think it is significant that the Apostle Paul ended his letter to the Ephesians with a special prayer for those ***“...who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love undying.”*** (Ephesians 6:24) I say this because in the years since, apparently a new generation had arisen in the Ephesian church—a generation that had not followed the example set by their elders. I mean, at Ephesus there was a time when love for the Lord flowed like water—but now it had dwindled to a trickle. And it is so easy for this to happen—it’s so easy for the flame of our love to diminish.

Unfortunately, marriage can provide us with a good illustration of this principle. At first, our love for our sweethearts fills every thought—but over the years that kind of fervor often diminishes.

I’m reminded of Dan Erickson’s *“7 STAGES OF A COLD for a Married Couple.”* Here they are:

- The first year of marriage, the husband says, *“Honey, I’m worried about my little girl. You have a bad sniffle. I want to put you in the hospital for a complete checkup. I know the food is terrible there, so I have arranged for meals for you to be sent in from Mamma Lucia’s.”*
- The second year: *“Listen, sweetheart, I don’t like the sound of that cough. I’ve called the doctor and he said I can bring you in this afternoon. Just rest in bed until it’s time go.”*
- The third year: *“Maybe you should lie down, dear. I’ll make supper tonight. Do we have any cans of soup in the house?”*
- The Fourth year: *“Look, dear be sensible. After you have fed the kids and washed the dishes, you really should go to bed.”*
- The Fifth year: *“Why don’t you take a couple of aspirin?”*
- The Sixth year: *“Please gargle, or something, instead of sitting there barking like a seal. I think I’ll sleep on the couch tonight.”*
- The Seventh year: *“Would you stop sneezing. What are you trying to do, give me pneumonia? You better sleep on the couch tonight.”*

Hopefully none of you can relate! But do you understand the principle here? I mean, do you remember how excited you were about Jesus when you first met Him? Do you remember the ease with which you prayed back then and the joy you found in reading the Bible? Be honest—if you were to compare your love for Jesus then and now—which would be stronger?

Jesus said that if we love Him we will show it by obeying His commands—INCLUDING THE WAY WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER. Do you do that now as fervently as you once did? Do you LOVE other believers as much as you did BEFORE COVID? Or

have you fallen into the habit of so many---TOO MANY---who have let disagreements over the silly politics of masks and mandates to limit your love.

But, back to Ephesus. What do you think caused this dwindling of love at this amazing church? What made the Ephesians' love grow cold? For that matter, what makes this kind of thing happen in Christians in our day?

You know, the truth is most of us don't LOSE our first love—no, we just SUPPLANT it with another love. For example, we bury our love for our Lord under our love of some SECRET SIN—even though we know in our hearts that this behavior is something God hates. Sometimes our love for God is pushed aside by our love of POPULARITY or SUCCESS. We allow ourselves to get too busy in our careers to nurture a relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Sometimes here in Montgomery County it's sports that puts Jesus on the back-burner of our lives. I loved what Dordene Harper's daughter, Cheryl shared at her service this week about select teams. Cheryl said when they were young and were invited to join one of these traveling teams, Dordene saw that it would require them to play on Sunday and miss Bible Study and Worship. Dordene said, *"NOPE! In this family our love for God comes first."*

I know this is a sensitive issue, but too many families are active in church until their kids get old enough to become involved in sports that conflict with Sunday and when that happens, they just kind of eventually disappear from campus.

That's just one example. My point is, for whatever the reason—the truth is—the sin of Ephesus is still around. The members of too many churches still lose their first love, which is why the ending of this first letter is so very important. You see, Jesus not only COMMENDS and CRITICIZES.

3.) **He also COMMANDS.**

He tells these seven churches what they—what WE should do to fix our problems. For Ephesus He says three things:

a. **He says, "REMEMBER."**

"Remember the height from which you have fallen."

Like your phone, every once in a while, MY phone will let me know it has compiled some pictures of five years ago or ten years ago on that day. And as I click on that link and swipe through those pictures—do you know what happens?

- I REMEMBER—I remember when we took the grands to the Aquarium in Baltimore.
- I REMEMBER playing in the sand on the beach at Ocean Isle with all five of them—building a sand castle or collecting shells or chasing sea gulls.
- I REMEMBER the weddings of our three children

And as I REMEMBER, my eyes fill with tears and my heart swells with love. REMEMBERING is a POWERFUL thing!

Well, Jesus is saying the Ephesians and us—we must do whatever it takes to REMEMBER the past—back when He really was FIRST in our hearts!

This is what the prodigal son did—REMEMBER? As he stood knee deep in pig slop he remembered what his life had been like before he left home—back when his love for his father was first in his life. And that memory prompted him to return home to the loving arms of his father. The words of Jennie Hussey's great hymn come to mind. The chorus is a prayer and goes like this:

"Lest I forget Gethsemane—lest I forget Thine agony—lest I forget Thy love for me—lead me to Calvary."

To get back our first love—to repair the damage that comes from not loving as we first did—we must REMEMBER what JESUS has done for us. We must remember the days when our love for Him was FIRST in our lives.

b. **And then second, Jesus says, "...REPENT."**

Once we have SEEN how far we have fallen—once we see the gap between the way we are now living and the way we used to live—we must bridge that gap through genuine repentance. We must turn our life around, making a conscious vow to do whatever it takes to make our relationship with Jesus right again.

c. Finally, Jesus says, “RESUME.”

“RESUME—do again the things you did at first.”

Remember—love is an emotion—but it grows out of committed ACTION—so to get our first love back—we must do the things we first did. Harry Emerson Fosdick says, that *“The great truth about Christianity is that no man need stay the way he is.”* And we don’t—with the power of God’s Spirit in us, we CAN repent of our sin—we can stop doing the things that we know we should not do. We can re-arrange our priorities. We can change! We can put God first again.

But please note: Jesus warns that if we do not do these things—if we do not CHANGE our ways. If we keep going down the wrong road, He will remove our lampstand from its place. He’s not saying He’ll throw us in Hell—no—He is simply warning that He can’t use us if we don’t repent. If we HIDE OUR LIGHT—He’ll use other LIGHTS—other believers.

Well, apparently at first, this church at Ephesus heeded this warning. In a letter from Bishop Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century he describes that church in glowing terms. But later it relapsed and by the Middle Ages its Christian testimony had been obliterated. Archbishop Tench, who visited the village then, wrote, *“I found only three Christians in Ephesus and these sunken in such ignorance and apathy as scarcely to have heard the names of St. Paul or St. John.”*

We must heed this warning here at Redland because a church has no light if it has no love. Our sweet, sweet, Spirit is not a given nor is our reputation for being grace-driven. If we forget WHO Jesus is and WHAT He has done for us our light will be taken from us. We can only be effective as long as we love Jesus and each other. And if you need motivation, listen to the last verse of this letter once again. Jesus promises that if we do these things—we will be given, **“...the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the garden of God.”** (2:7) This is a way of saying that as long as we remember, repent, and resume—we’ll enjoy the caliber of life—the caliber of relationship with God—that Adam and Eve lost due to their sin.

LET US PRAY