



September 24th, 2025

Week 3

“Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus: Thus says the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands: ²I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars. ³I know that you have persevered and endured hardships for the sake of my name, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet you do have this: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷“Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

God and Emperor are the two meanings of the New Testament word kurios which we translate as “Lord”: kurios in the Jewish world is the substitute (or super locution) for the sacred name Yahweh; kurios in the Roman world is the title given the sovereign Caesar. When we say “Jesus is Lord (kurios)” we are saying that he is God and Emperor! That is who is dictating the seven messages.

1. Why seven churches? (1:9)

It is curious (and difficult to interpret) that each of the seven messages are spoken to angels.

Our options are, that one, Jesus is speaking to real angels who have some role in the life of congregations; two, Jesus is speaking to the preachers who are responsible to speak God's Word to the congregations; and three, Jesus is speaking to the corporate "angel-ness" of each congregation. I have to tell you I do not yet fully understand what John is getting at.

What is clear is that in the rest of Revelation every use of the word angel refers to supernatural beings, never to human beings. So on strictly grammatical grounds we have to go with option one: Jesus is speaking to the _____ of the churches.

The message to the angel is actually a message through the angel to the church.

Ephesus is the first church to which Jesus speaks. He speaks to it first partly because it is the first church the mail carrier would reach after sailing from the island of Patmos. But he speaks to them first mostly because Ephesus was the most influential of the seven cities, and the church in Ephesus was the most influential of the seven churches.

Ephesus was a major financial center, not only for Asia Minor but for the ancient world at large. Its banks held huge monetary deposits and it had the most important seaport on the western coast of Asia. This meant that people from many different nations ended up in Ephesus.

Ephesus was home to the Pan-Ionian Games, surpassed in grandeur only by the Olympic Games held in Athens.

Ephesus was proud to be the home of the worship of the mother goddess Artemis, as the Greeks called her, Diana, as the Romans called her. She was the fertility goddess, the embodiment of sexuality and the embodiment of sexual lust. Her temple in Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It was built on a platform measuring more than 100,000 square feet, twice the size of a football field. It had 100 stone columns, made of marble, each 55 feet high.

In 29 b.c. Ephesus became one of the centers for the worship of the goddess Dea Roma and a center for the emperor cult. The chief way Rome honored its subject cities for their loyalty was to allow the city to build a temple to the emperors. Ephesus was given the honor four times!

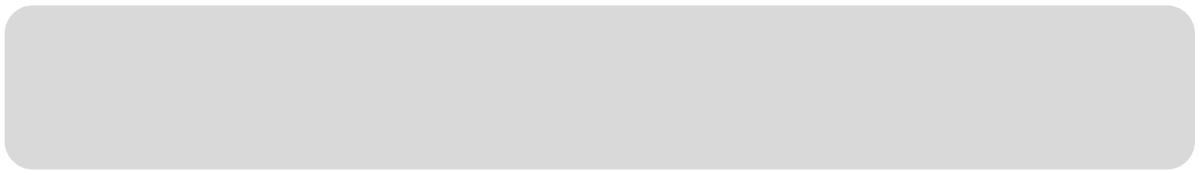
In that center of business, politics and religious pluralism emerged one of the most influential churches in the history of Christianity.

The church was born during a brief visit by the apostle Paul and his co-workers Priscilla and Aquila. After Paul left, Priscilla and Aquila nurtured the young congregation. Paul recognized the strategic importance of the city, and so returned to spend two and a half years in the church (the longest period of time he spent in any one place). (Acts 18-19)

Church tradition says that toward the end of the first century Timothy was murdered by the Romans. Thus, the apostle John became the pastor of the church in Ephesus and there wrote the fourth gospel.

By the time of Revelation's writing, Ephesus had become the center of the Christian movement; the center having moved from Jerusalem, to Antioch, to Ephesus. It would later move to Rome.

2. Who was the most famous church member in Ephesus?



What a church! Founded by the apostle Paul, nurtured by Priscilla and Aquila and Timothy, pastored by the apostle John, and home to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

What does Jesus have to say to this influential church?

In each of the seven messages, Jesus refers to himself using images from his initial apocalypse recorded in 1:9-20. In the Ephesian letter Jesus refers to himself as ***“him who holds seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands”*** (2:1).

Jesus reiterates the message of the initial vision but makes it stronger. In the initial vision Jesus _____ the seven stars, the seven angels. Here he says he _____ them.

They are his and he will not let them go. In the initial vision Jesus _____ among the seven churches. Here he says he _____ among the churches.

“I know your deeds,” says Jesus, beginning with words of commendation, glowing words of praise. What a church! The kind of church to which the experts would have flocked to pick up principles on being a successful church.

"I know your hard work," says Jesus. The word emphasizes "strenuous and exhausting labor." They are pushing themselves for the kingdom. They are diligent and conscientious.

They are all willing to pay the price of commitment. ***"I know your perseverance,"*** says Jesus. Another strong word. It emphasizes that inner attitude of long-suffering, patient endurance of hardship. They had to face strong and relentless opposition for their faith.

3. Who can the Ephesians not tolerate?

"I know that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false," says Jesus. Apparently some self-appointed apostles had come into Ephesus with their "enlightened" findings. Jesus calls some of them the Nicolaitans (2:16).

The point for now is that the Ephesian church was committed to orthodoxy, to knowing and defending ***"the faith once and for all delivered to the saints"*** (Jude 3). They had taken seriously the apostle Paul's admonition to the church, 40 years earlier: ***"Be on guard for yourselves and for the flock ... savage wolves will come in among you speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert"*** (Acts 20:28-31).

They carefully and thoughtfully ***"tested the Spirits"*** as John had exhorted them to do (1 John 4). They ***"guarded the gospel"*** as Paul through Timothy had exhorted them to do (2 Tim 1:14).

They were a discerning people, measuring everything they heard and read against the truth in Jesus. They would not settle for "feel-good" theologizing. Like Jesus himself, they hated the doctrine of the Nicolaitans and any other ideas that draw disciples into the darkness.

Jesus' words of commendation leave us wondering if anything could be wrong in Ephesus?

"But I have this against you," says Jesus, ***"you have left your first love"*** (2:4).

He who holds the angels in his right hand, walks among the churches, knows the real condition of our souls, sees through all the activity, all the patience, all the orthodoxy—he tells the church that it is flawed at the center. The church has everything except the one thing Jesus deserves.

“I have this against you, you have left your first love.”

What is this “first love”? “First love” is the love experienced between two persons who are “in love.” “First love” is the love we had for Jesus when he first broke through to us and won us by his love. (Falls Creek)

Jesus says that for all of their hard work, patient endurance and orthodoxy the Ephesians were no longer “in love” with him. Affection and intimacy were gone.

Throughout the Bible our relationship with God is likened to the relationship between a bride and groom. In the Old Testament, for example, God speaks of having found Israel and taken her for his bride. He pledged his love to her and called her into a love relationship with him. Yet Israel began to flirt with other lovers, with the gods of the people around her. And soon she was more in love with those other gods—materialism, comfort, entertainment and financial security. She kept going through the external forms of devotion to Yahweh, but she was no longer in love with God.

Over and over again we hear God plead with Israel, calling her to come back: ***“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me”*** (Jer 2:2); ***“What fault did you find in me that you strayed so far from me?”*** (Jer 2:5).

Can you feel a lover’s pain in the question? “What did I do wrong? Come back.”

The New Testament also employs this bride/groom analogy. We are Jesus’ bride, married to him, redeemed for intimacy with him. The whole book of Revelation builds up to the revealing of the Bride of the Lamb. ***“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”*** (19:9).

Paul tells the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3:

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

That is what had happened to the church at Ephesus, the most influential church of Asia Minor. They had fallen out of pure and simple devotion, out of affection, out of intimacy.

"You left your first love."

"I have this against you, you have left your first love."

"But Lord, I am working hard for the church."

"I know, but you have lost your first love."

"But Lord, I am fighting for the truth on all kinds of fronts."

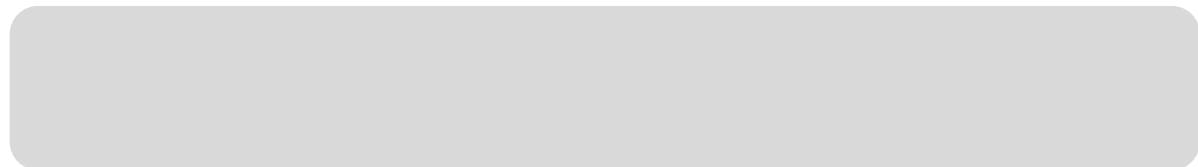
"I know, but you have lost your first love."

"But Lord, I came out on the front lines, securing beachheads for the kingdom."

"I know. Thank you. But you have lost the attentiveness, the tenderness, the extravagance of your first love."

What do we do?

4. What three things does Jesus call the Ephesian Church to do?



Jesus says to the Ephesians, ***"Remember the heights from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first"*** (2:5).

First, _____. Recognize our condition. If we have fallen out of love, we need to confess it. Jesus does not call us to beat ourselves up over this. Nor does he call us to work ourselves up into some emotional state. He simply calls us to recognize where we are and admit it to ourselves and to him.

Second, _____. The word means to turn around, to stop and make a radical U-turn in the street, to shift the focus back on him. The sense of the word is to do it vigorously. Turning involves changing schedules, habits, commitments in order to restore intimacy.

Confess that we are in love with other lords. Confess that we are worshipping work, that success and financial security are more important than simply loving Jesus.

And third, _____. Go back and do the things we did when we first fell in love. Is that not how we restore romance in marriage? Go back and do what you did

when you first started dating. Make dates to go out to dinner. Write love notes. Buy roses.

Jesus is calling us to do whatever it takes to restore "first love." Nothing satisfies _____ but **him** and his love. And nothing satisfies _____ but us and our love.

Jesus speaks a solemn warning: ***"If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."***

He is Lord of the church and has every right to do it. And he has done it. How many churches are but shells of their former selves? They have all the trappings, but there is no light in them. The lampstand has been taken away.

Where simple love for Jesus goes, so does the light. Without "first love," service becomes lifeless routine or even drudgery. Without "first love," endurance becomes the joyless "shuffle of the stone." Without "first love," orthodoxy becomes narrow-minded, nitpicking legalism. Without "first love," hatred of the practices of the Nicolaitans becomes hatred of the Nicolaitans themselves.

Jesus makes a wonderful promise to those who "overcome," who do remember, repent and re-do. ***"To the one who overcomes I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God"*** (2:7).

"The tree of life" is found in the first pages of the Bible and in the last. It is there in the first creation, in the middle of the garden of Eden. It is there in the new creation in the middle of the city of God.

In the first creation the way to it is blocked. No one can get to it. It represents all the goodness of life the Lord of Life longs to share with those who love him. In the first creation, because of sin, the way to it is blocked.

In the new creation the blocks have been removed because of the _____ . By the death of Jesus the way has been opened.

And it turns out that the tree of life is *Jesus himself*. His promise to "first love" lovers is more of himself!

*Written portions are taken from "Discipleship on the Edge" by Darrell W. Johnson.