

The Church at Ephesus

2: 1-7

DIG: What do you know about the church at Ephesus (see Acts 18:18 to 19:41)? What good characterized these believers? How might its strengths have been the cause of its failure? What do you think their worship was like? Who were the Nicolaitans? What is repentance? Why was it necessary for the Ephesian church?

REFLECT: Of the positive qualities mentioned about this church, which best describes you? Your church? Your messianic synagogue? Why? Is there anything that can be substituted for Yeshua's love in your life? Is there any way in which you have left your first love for Him? Has something or someone else taken His place? Has God removed your testimony? What secrets have you found to keep that love alive?

Today, believing in ADONAI can mean just about anything. It has been reduced to believing in practically everything, yet at the same time, it means nothing . . . because it means so little. But though the world may be confused about what a believer in Jesus is, the Bible is clear. They are those who are united to God through Christ. They have repented of their sins and are saved by faith alone in Yeshua Messiah. As a result, ADONAI has forgiven their sins and made them His children and transformed them into new creatures indwelt by God the Holy Spirit.

Many things characterize a believer in Jesus, but the foremost characteristic is the love of God. When challenged to name the single greatest commandment of the Torah, Jesus replied: Love ADONAI your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37). Those who love Yeshua Messiah are blessed (Ephesians 6:24), and those who do not are cursed (First Corinthians 16:22). But while the love of God will always be present in true believers, it can fluctuate in its intensity. Believers will not always love Jesus Christ will all their heart, soul and mind, which is a sin. There is no better illustration in Scripture of the seriousness of allowing love for Yeshua to wane than this letter to the church in Ephesus.⁴⁰

1. The description of Christ: Although He is not specifically named, it is obvious that this is Jesus Christ as He was depicted in the vision of 1:9-20. It could only be the Messiah who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1c). In fact, Christ identifies Himself to each of the first five churches by

using a phrase from that vision (2:8 with 1:18; 2:12 with 1:16; 2:18 with 1:14-15 and 3:1 with 1:16). That reinforces the truth that **He** is the author of the letters. They are **His** direct word, through the apostle John, to those local congregations, to other **churches** like them in years beyond, even all the way down to us today. **The Messiah** walked **among the seven churches** in Asia Minor at that time. **He** was in full control, and those first century believers had nothing to fear. Not even Domitian.

2. **The church: To the angel of the church in Ephesus write (2:1a)**. Perhaps no **church** in history had as rich a testimony and heritage as this one. The name **Ephesus** means *desired one*. The balance of authority and ministry had shifted from Jerusalem to **Ephesus** after Jerusalem had been destroyed in AD 70. **Ephesus** was then the primary center of **Church** teaching and practice. It was a great **church** that began in the home of Aquila and Priscilla who had come there with Paul (**Acts 18:18-19**). Actually the **churches** at Corinth, Ephesus and Rome all began in the home of Aquila and Priscilla. Paul spent about three years **in Ephesus (Acts 20:31)** and it became the center of evangelism for all of Asia Minor (**Acts 19:10**). There is little doubt that the other six **churches** in Asia Minor were founded as a result of Paul's ministry **in Ephesus**. Later, the ministry there was carried on by Paul's companion **Timothy (First Timothy 1:3)**, and according to fathers of the faith, Irenaeus and Eusebius, after Paul's death, by the apostle **John**. No doubt **John** was leading the Ephesian community of believers when **he** was arrested and exiled to Patmos.

3. **The city**: While not its capital (Pergamum was the province's official capital), **Ephesus (2:1b)** was the most important city in Asia Minor. In fact, since the Roman governor lived there, it could be argued that **Ephesus** was the de facto capital. Its population in New Covenant times was estimated between 250,000 and 500,000 people. Situated at the mouth of the Cayster River on a gulf of the Aegean Sea, it had a great seaport on its harbor. From its elevation of 450 feet it dominated the view, the most striking and picturesque feature of the city.⁴¹ Four great trade routes converged on **Ephesus**, as a result, it was called the metropolis of Asia and the Romans felt it was the greatest center of trade east of Rome. The city's theater, where Rabbi Sha'ul and his companions were dragged (**Acts 19:29**), seated some 25,000 people. Athletic events, rivaling the Olympic games, were held in a stadium there. As a free city, it was granted self-government by Rome and no Roman troops were stationed there. It also served as a legal city in which the Romans tried important cases and dispensed justice on a regular basis.⁴²

It was also a religious center. The cult of emperor worship was very strong there, and temples were built for Claudius, Hadrian and Severus. No matter what gods they worshiped, each individual was required to swear allegiance to Cesar as the supreme lord over all. It was

also known for its magical arts and was one of the centers of occultism. It had long been the home of the Mother Goddess, who was identified by the Greeks as Artemis, or Diana in Latin (**Acts 19:35**). To this goddess was dedicated a huge temple that was known as one of the wonders of the ancient world with a tree of "salvation" in the midst of it. About four times the size of the Parthenon, it was 425 feet long, 200 feet wide, and 60 feet high. It had 127 marble pillars, 36 of them overlaid with gold and jewels. Because its inner shrine was supposedly sacred, this temple served as one of the most important banks in the Mediterranean world. The temple also provided sanctuary from criminals. Further, the sale of little idols used in the worship of Artemis provided an important source of income for the city (**Acts 19:24**). Every spring a month-long festival was held in honor of the goddess, complete with athletic, dramatic and musical events.⁴³

The worship of Artemis was unspeakably evil. Sexual immorality was rampant **in Ephesus**, and it was one of the most immoral cities of the ancient world. This temple also became the site of the worship of the goddess Roma and of the Roman Emperor.⁴⁴ Thousands of priestesses, who were little more than ritual prostitutes, played a major role in the worship of Artemis. The temple grounds were a chaotic scene made up of priests, prostitutes, bankers, criminals, musicians, dancers and frenzied, hysterical worshipers. The philosopher Heraclitus was called the weeping philosopher because he said no one could live **in Ephesus** and not weep over its immorality. Huddled in the midst of such pagan idolatry that characterized **Ephesus**, was a group of faithful believers. It was to them that the **Messiah** addressed the first of His **seven** letters.⁴⁵

4. The commendation: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. The Greek word for **hard work** is *kopos*, which means *toil that exhausts*. Perseverance means *endurance*. Despite their difficult circumstances, they were faithful to **ADONAI** and had toiled long and **hard** for the Gospel. But **hard work** can never be substituted for the **love of the Lord** in their lives, in my life or in your life. **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 (2:2).** Apparently the Ephesian **church** had the ability to discern spiritual truth. They could recognize false teachers and teachings. Many years earlier Paul had told them: **I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears (Acts 20:29-31).** False doctrine would be on its way and they fought against it. They believed in theological truth and sound doctrine. They tested the spirits to see if they were from **God (First John 4:1-3).**

They did not tolerate **wicked men**. But as great as its doctrinal stand was, there was something fundamentally wrong with that **church**.

In the second **commendation**, **Yeshua** says: **You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary (2:3)**. This problem with false teachers was not a temporary one; the problem had been ongoing. Because they refused to bow-the-knee to the goddess Diana or the images of the emperor, they found themselves maligned, slandered, boycotted, and abused. Like the Jew merchants in Berlin in the 1930s, the believers **in Ephesus** would have been objects of physical violence, social ostracism, and economic repression. Nonetheless, they endured; they bore up under the load and had **persevered and endured hardships for Christ's sake** for over thirty-five years. Now you would think that it would have been an expression of **love**. Yet according to this **2:4** it was not. It was a strange paradox, but they had left their **first love** even though they had **endured hardships** for the sake of **Christ**. Nothing can substitute for our relationship with **Jesus**. Absolutely nothing.

Christ's third **commendation** related to doctrinal discernment. The Ephesians sniffed out, rejected and put those so-called "apostles" to the test. They took their stand against a group of false teachers active in Asia Minor in the late first century. **Jesus** said: **You have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate (2:6)**. The word **Nicolaitans** comes from two Greek words, one *laos*, meaning *the people*, and the other, *nikao*, meaning *to conquer*. We get our word *laity* from the last part of that word. It seemed to be an effort to usurp the rightful authority of **the church** leaders and to rule over *the people*.

John had sent out itinerant teachers to his converts in Asia Minor and they were rebuffed by a dictatorial leader named **Diotrephes**, who even excommunicated believers who showed hospitality to **John's** messengers. So, **John** communicated: **I wrote to you, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome his brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church (Third John 9-10)**. **The Nicolaitans** were false prophets who came into these early **churches** with the purpose of usurping the authority of Paul and even **Christ Himself**. To accomplish this, they claimed to have divine powers, even working pseudo-miracles. They were eloquent and persuasive men. **Peter** said they would **introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord**, being able to **exploit the flock with stories they had made up by mouthing empty, boastful words (Second Peter 2:1, 3,**

18). By such means these *conquerors of the people* tried to **change the grace of our God into a license for immorality (Jude 4)**. But the Ephesians were well taught in doctrine, by Paul, by **Timothy**, and then by **John**. They recognized those false prophets and they hated their **practices**. Therefore, **Yeshua** commended them for it.

This danger was not unique to the early **churches**, and **Jesus** desires that all believers watch for, and reject, **the practices of the Nicolaitans**. The dangers are just as real today. False prophets, pseudo-miracles, *people conquerors*, false teachers who deny the deity of **Christ**, antinomian teachers who say that **God's grace** covers deliberately immoral behavior, men and women who take authority to themselves that **the Messiah** never intended, are at least as great a problem in the **Church** today as it was then. The glimpse of **Christ's** stand against the sin and the embrace of the sinner should give us confidence to speak **the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)**, while letting **ADONAI** alone judge the world (**First Cor 5:9-12**).⁴⁶

5. The concern: Like an unexpected twist in the road during a pleasant drive through the countryside, **Messiah** interrupted **His** commendations of the Ephesians with one abrupt word: **But**. The small Greek word *alla* indicates a sharp contrast, and in the case of Ephesus, it was very significant: **But I hold this against you . . . You have left your first love (2:4)**. There was something missing in their lives. They got busy with other things. How did this happen? Martha could certainly be commended for her faithfulness in the kitchen. But **Jesus** told her that she had left out the very best thing. Mary sat at the feet of **Jesus** in relationship with him, and **Yeshua** said that was better than all of Martha's busy work. She had settled for something good, instead of something better. The first thing that goes in the believer's life is their **first love**. You can still be active and accomplish a great deal for **ADONAI**. But the first thing that goes is the love for **Jesus Himself**. We are all grateful for what **He** has done. We love **Him** for **His** death on the cross. We love **Him** that **He** rose from the dead. We love **Messiah** in the sense that one day **He** is going to come back and we are going to see **Him**. However, there is more here than loving **Him** for what **He** has done . . . past tense. **You have left your first love**. Was **Yeshua** your **first love**? If anything gets in the way of **your love** for **Him**, **He** wants it out of the way.

We are not told why this happened to the Ephesians. Some have said they were too busy heresy hunting. They were very interested in orthodoxy. However, I have known people who are very orthodox, but they held their theological views with less than a loving attitude. To them, it is more important to win their theological argument than anything else. Maybe they were just careless. This happens sometimes, we can become careless about our faith if we are not careful. This erosion doesn't happen overnight. No one suddenly wakes up one day and says, "I don't love **Jesus** anymore. I'm tired of **Yeshua** and I'm finished with **Him**." We wake

up one day and find ourselves somewhat distant in our relationship with **Messiah**. It doesn't happen like that. It happens over the years - after hardship, questions you can't answer, trials that don't seem to have any purpose, the loss of hope, or the loss of a loved one. To avoid this we need to constantly remind ourselves of what **Jesus Christ** has done for us. That is to say, every day we need to renew our faith.

In the midst of the Ephesians' hard work and endurance for **Christ**, their **love** for **Him** began to fade. Thirty-five years earlier, Paul had written the church **in Ephesus**, commending them for their **love** (**Ephesians 1:15-16, 6:23-24**). **Ephesus** means *darling*. Think of the **love** between two newlyweds. The effort to set up a household, adjust to one another's habits, and develop a new work schedule often occurs under difficult situations, yet **first love** causes the couple to remember these early times with humor and tenderness. The Ephesians had lost that kind of **love**. It wasn't enough that they continued through the motions. **Jesus** wanted more than their doctrinal discerning deeds. **He** wanted the devotion and adoration of their hearts.

Don't we all know "religious" people who seem burdened and grim as they try to please **ADONAI**? They are so busy doing **the King's** business, that they have no time for **the King**. Perhaps they have lost some of that **first love** that brings **joy** into even difficult tasks. Maybe they need to make some adjustments in the way they live, in order to renew and nurture their **love** for **God**. King David said it best: **Restore to me the joy of Your salvation (Psalm 51:12a)**.

What about you? Are there moments when you can pursue and allow **Yeshua's** presence to fill your heart? It might be a reflective moment after services, or prayer, or a brief moment of quiet that gives you a chance to rest in **the Lord's** loving embrace. Is there a sin that calls for repentance? Seek forgiveness, and know **the joy** that comes from a heart made light by **Jesus' love**. Be attentive to **the Spirit**, and come back to your **first love**!⁴⁷

6. The command: After charging the Ephesians with abandoning their **first love**, **Christ** pointed out three simple ways to swing a U-turn and reestablish their walks in the right direction: **remember, repent** and rekindle. First, they were to **remember the height from which** they had **fallen!** **The Ephesians** had wandered far from the roots of **love**, and **Messiah** was calling them to come to their senses and return home. They were told to **remember** because they had forgotten. The **love** that they had for **the Lord** had grown cold. As believers, sometimes remembering the way life used to be can be the first step on our way back to our **first love** for **Jesus** and an energetic **love** for others.

Secondly, they were told to **repent**, that is, turn around and go in a different direction, **and do** in obedience **the things you did at first**. A new attitude must be the first step in any authentic change of actions. Repentance is a true inward change, not a fake outward modification of behavior. It is a work of grace created by **God the Holy Spirit**, which involves a deeply personal decision. This would suggest that the cooling off in our love for **Christ** is a sin, something to be repented of. **If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your menorah from its place (2:5)**. If they did **not repent**, it would lead to the destruction of the witness, the testimony, and the effectiveness, of that **church** in the world. Its **angel** would be removed and **the Messiah** would no longer dwell in their midst. Yes, a group of people did continue to meet **in Ephesus** for many years afterwards, even calling themselves a **church**. But it would no longer belong to **Jesus**. Eventually the city of **Ephesus** became a ruin. This correction to **the Ephesian church** represents every other person whose **love** for **Christ** has grown cold. This warning still applies to us today.⁴⁸

Thirdly, an unspoken response by the Ephesians was to rekindle their **love** relationship with **the Lord**. After remembering and repenting, believers who had **left** their **first love** needed to rekindle it again. How is that done? You have to work at it. You have to do the things that you did when you **first** came to know and **love Yeshua**. Emotions are the caboose on this and not the engine. Once you have committed yourself to action and are faithful, after a time, the feelings will inevitably follow.

7. The counsel: Listen! This is for you! **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Holy Spirit says to the churches** then and now. It is a spiritual principle that only those who desire to know **God's** will can know it (**John 7:17**). Only those who have spiritual ears can **hear what the Holy Spirit says**. This is a promise from **Jesus**. **To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24), which is in the paradise of God (2:7)**. Believers are overcomers. **For everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God (First Yochanan 5:4-5)**.

This would have been especially comforting to those believers living **in Ephesus** because they knew full well of a tree-shrine in the center of the temple of the goddess Artemis. That tree-shrine was supposed to be a place of salvation for the criminal, a place of refuge, surrounded by a wall. But that "salvation" had corrupted the city. The Ephesian who had to live in that immoral city understood well the contrast to **the Holy City**, where **nothing impure would ever enter it, nor would anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those names are written in the Lamb's book of life (21:10 and 27)**. To those

Ephesians, the salvation of the cross stood out in marked contrast to the "salvation" of Artemis, which gave the criminals immunity to continue their crimes even if they were about to die.⁴⁹ It is the same for us today. If you have overcome **the world** by faith in **Yeshua the Messiah**, you will have eternal **life**. **He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life (First John 5:12).**

The example of the Ephesian **church** warns that doctrinal orthodoxy and outward service cannot make up for a cold heart. Believers must carefully heed Solomon's counsel: **Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23).**⁵⁰

*Lord of my salvation, perfect Lover, fill me with more of Your **love** and presence. May I never forget that you are the source of **life**.*⁵¹ *In the name of **Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden menorahs**. Amen.*

The Ephesian messianic community is a picture of believers during the **Apostolic Church Age from AD 30 to 96**. When this letter was written, **the church in Ephesus** was then in its second generation, those who had come into that **church** in the thirty years since Paul had ministered in their midst. Though they continued to labor faithfully as those who had preceded them, the **love of God** that had characterized the first generation was missing. This cooling of heart was a dangerous forerunner of spiritual apathy and eventual removing of their **lampstand from its place**. Unfortunately, this became the pattern of the **Church** from then on: First a cooling of spiritual **love**, then the **love of God** replaced by a **love** for the things of the world, with resulting compromise and spiritual corruption. This was followed by departure from the faith and loss of effective spiritual testimony.⁵² Believers during the Apostolic Church Age preached the Gospel around the world, but with successive generations, it **left** its **first love**.

The seven churches to whom **the Lord** communicated **His** message were geographically laid out in a circle. After leaving Ephesus and traveling north up one of the several main routes you would come to the city of **Smyrna**, some thirty-five miles north, so that is where we shall travel next.