

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Ephesus Set the Stage

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 candlesticks; 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 love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I 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 God. (Revelation 2:1-7, KJV 1900)

Each mini-letter to the individual churches is clearly a personal message to that church, addressing her unique needs and problems. In this study, we shall begin with a few observations that appear in each of these seven letters.

1. *Unto the angel of the church....* Who is the "Angel" of each church? The word translated "angel" in the New Testament is defined as a messenger. Three possible interpretations are commonly offered. 1) The "Angel" is the pastor of the church who regularly preaches the gospel to her and brings her the "Message" of the gospel. 2) The "Angel" is a heavenly angel, God's messenger/protector/guide to each individual church. 3) The "Angel" is the individual to whom John gave the Revelation letter with instructions to deliver and read it to each church. While the second view, a heavenly angel, is interesting, and no doubt the Lord routinely uses angels to deliver messages and to minister in many ways to His people, He has made a clear point already of telling John that He holds the churches in His hand; He gives no indication that He has transferred custody or control over the churches to angels. The third view, that the angel is the person to whom John gave the letter with instructions to communicate it to these seven churches, seems the weakest of the three. John addresses an individual at each church, not one person, so unless we can make a case that John gave the letter to seven men, one from each church, this view holds no solid Biblical support. I hold to the first view. The Lord sends His message to His churches most often through the man whom He has called and appointed as that church's pastor. For the

man who occupies that position, the responsibility is at times overwhelming—and should be, driving Him to rely wholly on the Lord for direction, wisdom, and grace to serve faithfully as the Lord's messenger to the church, never view the church as his personal fiefdom. For the individual church, the thought is equally sobering. While every sermon is not equally enlightening or filled with "Holy Spirit unction," the church, consisting of individual people, should pray for the Lord to give their pastor the right message for their need every time they consider the church's gathering. When the man preaches, he will occasionally touch their personal tender spots, their besetting sins, or their aberrant beliefs. It is so very easy on those occasions for the individual to "Shoot the messenger" instead of respectfully taking the message to heart. What changes would unfold in your life if you attended every service in your church with the prayerful desire that the Lord give the pastor the message that you really need to hear on that day? And how might you react if the sermon on that day was one of rebuke and exhortation? When we embrace a sinful, carnal attitude toward our service to God in and through the church, His "...pillar and ground of the truth," we easily fall into the habit of criticizing the pastor or other preachers instead of accepting the message as God's personal "Sermon" to us on that day. Someone has described this attitude as "It is easier to sin and then ask for forgiveness than to repent, confess to past sins and to thus avoid future sin;" or, better yet, to take Scripture and the gospel we've heard to heart and apply them to our lives, so that we avoid sin in the first place. God shows amazing

compassion and forgiveness toward repentant children, but He also shows amazing firmness—severity is the Bible word (Romans 11:22; severity is not injustice or unfairness, but rather a firm and fixed resistance to the sin)—toward the unrepentant child who stubbornly rationalizes his/her sins and continues in them, despite His rebukes and exhortations in Scripture and in the gospel.

2. *These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.* In each letter, the Lord describes Himself differently. He presents Himself in the way most needed by that church's needs and problems. To a somewhat smug Ephesian Church, the Lord reminds the church that He is in charge, not they. To a suffering, struggling church, He will reveal His compassion or power to overcome their oppressors. His self-description starts our minds in the direction of His message to that church. Pay close attention to this brief section of each letter.
3. *I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience...* It would suffice for Him simply to say, "I know," but He goes the added step and tells the church what He knows, likely a further reminder that the local church is not their personal possession or tool to get their way, but it belongs to Him, and He knows fully the state of their stewardship. If they have worked hard, He knows it and blesses them, even if no one in the church knows a thing they do. If they have endured major trials with patient reliance on Him—or with impatient wrath—He knows. His "I know" comments to each church serve as both a kind reminder and as a personal and on-target rebuke. He always includes both the good and the bad. For example, though commending the Ephesian Church for her strong faithfulness, He also rebukes her for leaving her first (Most important) love, her love for Him and for His personal authority over her. At least some of the folks in the Ephesian Church seem to have embraced the "My church" attitude, forgetting that the church belongs to Him.
4. *Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.* After telling each church the good and the bad of her conduct, the Lord tells her what remedial action He requires of her. Only one or two of the churches is not rebuked for something. Any man who has served as a pastor for any length of time has faced the

difficult burden of trying to nudge people to confront their own sins and take righteous action to correct them. And any pastor who has followed this course faithfully has heard the sad—and lame—excuses and rationalizations from the erring member that attempts to justify continuing in the sinful course rather than repenting. I have often thought of the season when our three daughters were working their way through adolescence. They cared far more during that season about their friends and what attitudes and actions would please their friends than what attitudes and actions would please us. Ah, the "Everyone is doing it" adolescent attitude doesn't end with our twentieth birthday, does it? How often I've heard that attitude from someone who could not defend his/her conduct by Scripture point the finger at others. "Perhaps what I'm doing isn't just right, but what they are doing is so much more wrong, so why should I concern myself with my little sin when their sin is so much more aggravating to God?" This perpetual adolescent attitude must infuriate our Lord. Does Scripture direct us to use the failures of others as our guide, or does Scripture command us to follow the teachings and example of Scripture alone? When we fall into this childish attitude, we need to read the Lord's personal messages to these seven churches. We need to pay special attention to His "I know" comments. We cannot hide our sins from Him. He knows. We cannot rationalize our sins by pointing the finger at the sins of others. He knows. Not once in these seven letters did the Lord pat the sinning church on the head and say, "Oh, I don't fully approve of your conduct, but you are doing so much better than those other six churches, so don't bother to change. Don't worry about repenting. Compared to them, you are great." The Lord squarely confronted each church's sins, weighing them against His measuring rod, not the conduct of another imperfect church, and He always required each church to repent and to follow His commandments. He speaks the same message to us, does He not?

5. *To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life....* I find it interesting and informative that each of these "Overcoming" statements is addressed to an individual, not collectively to a group. Repentance and overcoming sin, though it may affect the whole church, begins with one person in the church, and that positive example spreads just as effectively as the sinful bad conduct. In many cases, an erring church may stubbornly continue in

her sin, while individual members in the church confront the message that the Lord sent to the church, take it to heart, and personally repent of their role in the greater collective church sin. Even if the whole church fails to repent, the Lord blesses every individual child of His who does repent and who takes His commandments to heart. Rather than the sinful attitude, "This church needs to repent, and repentance needs to start with you," the Lord's message is "This church needs to repent, and repentance needs to start with **me.**"

These five points appear in one way or another in each of these letters, though the problems, warnings, and promises are unique to each individual church.

My challenge, and yours, should be painfully obvious. If the Lord were to send a personal message to our church, what would He say to us? What things would He command us to change? What things would He commend? What behaviors might He name as He warned us to repent? What encouraging promises might He give us to urge us to that repentance? Oh, wait. He does that every time He blesses a man in the pulpit to preach the gospel with His power and with His Spirit. Are we listening? Repenting? Learning? Repenting? Growing? Repenting? Do we get His message to our church? Or shall we follow the sinful habit of merely rejecting the messenger?

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