

Letter to Ephesus pt2

1. "But"

- a. There are two portrayals of God common in our society, both echoing parents we've known or seen:
 - i. God is just so totally in love with us he would never say a harsh word to us.
 - ii. God is a demanding parent who no matter what we do we can never satisfy.
- b. Well, what is it. Is God one or the other? A compromise between the two? Something different?
- c. Having gone through the book of Ephesians we've been talking a lot about God saving us in the past tense and us realizing the truth that we have been saved by grace and stopping the destructive sinful habits of trying to save ourselves. How does that enter into this conversation?
- d. This section makes God's work in the Ephesian's church seem very conditional, based on their performance. Does this contradict what we've been talking about?
- e. Can God both love us enough to sacrificially save us and also have strong words about our behavior and even give threats and warnings about if we persist along a line?

2. Abandoned the first love

- a. Right away you note in the commentaries as is often true of rather ambiguous phrases we tend to pour into them a certain amount of our own experience and what we are going through and read them into the text. This of course can't be completely avoided, and in terms of making the move to "application" some of that will clear come in, but it is difficult to figure out exactly what the "first love" is that has been lost.
 - i. Some claim that this is the flipside to cold orthodoxy
 - ii. Some claim that perhaps fights caused division within the church so they lost their "first love" for one another
- b. One thing is clear that this is serious enough to warrant the warning, "I will remove your lampstand from its place". Note also that the particular introduction of the Son of Man also centered around the lampstands.
- c. Matthew 24:9-14 seems to track with this warning. There is reference so persecution, false prophets, enduring to the end (same word as in the previous praise), but "the love of many will grow cold" still is not very specific.
- d. From the exhortation they are called to "remember from where you have fallen and repent and do the first works". "Works" is repeated from verse 2.
- e. Perhaps it's best to keep it general and keep the application general as well. With the dominance of the lampstands in both the presentation and the warning Beale connects it with witness. The motivational structure of the gospel is intended to be misery, deliverance, gratitude and sometimes a life lived of faithful "bearing up" can lead to coasting and relaxing into certain forms.

3. Removal of the lampstand

- a. Remember this is being addressed to a church. The Bible is a mixture of enormously rich promises but also some brutal imagery about the passion with which God pursue's his mission. Think about the vine and how he prunes. In Luke 13:6-9 we have a parable of a

barren fig tree. What doesn't produce fruit will be cut down. Here, the lamp that does not produce light will be removed from its place. I think it is in these terms that we have to think about the loss of the first love. The initial passion produced "first works" which made the light shine. It was an enduring light but with all of the "bearing" the light has been diminishing.

- b. Ignatius was the Bishop of Antioch following Peter and then Evodius. He was eventually arrested and killed in the Roman Colosseum in 110 AD. The tradition says he was a disciple of John and on his way to Rome he too wrote a series of letters to churches, including the church in Ephesus. (See the introductory handout) Here are some comments he made to the church at Ephesus
 - i. But I have learned that certain people from there have passed your way with evil doctrine, but you did not allow them to sow it among you. You covered up your ears in order to avoid receiving the things being sown by them, because you are stones of a temple, prepared beforehand for the building of God the Father, hoisted up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a rope the Holy Spirit; your faith is what lifts you up, and love is the way that leads up to God.
 - ii. Let nothing appeal to you apart from him, in whom I carry around these chains (my spiritual pearls!), by which I hope, through your prayers, to rise again. May I always share in them, in order that I might be found in the company of the Christians of Ephesus who have always been in agreement with the apostles, by the power of Jesus Christ.
4. Nicolaitans: We'll get into this more with the church at Pergamum.
 - a. It is hard for us to appreciate the difficult position that Christianity created for its adherents in the ancient world which didn't distinguish politics, economics and religion. Jews to a degree in the empire were recognized as being a group apart, and so were given more leeway in not participating in the standard pagan and emperor cults. Remember too that religions were often determined by ethnicity, so if a person was an ethnic Jew, their position apart was more easily understood. Gentile Christians, however, were not recognized as such and so the natural assumption was that they would participate in the regular social, economic and political life of the empire which included participation in the temples. This would especially be true in a city like Ephesus with such a prominent and important temple. As we will see later the sin of the Nicolaitans was associated with the sin of Balaam as found in Numbers 25:1,2.
 - b. As you could see from the introduction to the letter from Ignatius the church leaders continually struggled against two fronts: Judaism and a Greek docetism which would develop into Gnosticism that de-emphasized the material. This could run the route of a justification that "what I do with my body doesn't matter because it's my spirit that's important..."
5. "he who has ears to hear": This is the same phrase Jesus uses with the parable of the sower. The parable of the sower too was a bit of a puzzle, and it included many of the same kinds of elements in these passages. There is a sense of inevitability, like the seed that will produce, the kingdom will come. There is an element of bearing up under difficulty and persecution from the birds, the shallow soil and the thorns. In the end the seed conquers.

6. "To everyone who conquers."
 - a. This in one form or another will conclude the letters. The root word is found 28 times in 24 verses in the New Testament, 17 of those times comes from the book of Revelation and six more times are found in the epistles of John. See the word sheet.
 - b. The book of Revelation very much sees the struggle the churches are entering as a struggle not between people as proxies of a deeper, spiritual struggle. We should keep Ephesians 6 in mind during this. It isn't against flesh and blood that we are struggling but powers and principalities. This type of conflictive language makes some people nervous because of the history that has accompanied much of it. If find again and that when the church engages "fight" and "conquer" and "evil" language that people simply approach it with the tools of the world. This is the same error made by those in Jesus' time who expected him to engage in their culture war against the Roman occupation. They imagined that the way to fight evil was either the isolation of the Essenes, the religious/cultural antagonism (cold war) of the Pharisees or the outright conflict of the Zealots. Paul says to overcome evil with good which is exactly what Jesus did. The Roman Christians will not fight against the temples by burning them down, they will fight against them by loving so deeply and sacrificially that the temples were abandoned, put out of business, and converted into use as churches.
 - c. It is also interesting that in each case that which the church must conquer is its own sin.
7. "Tree of life"
 - a. It was common in Inter-testamental Judaism to see the rewards of God's salvation as the undoing of the fall and the recapturing of paradise lost.
 - b. There are two words in Greek for "wood" and "tree". The word used here is usually used for cut wood or dead wood. It is the same word, however, used for the "tree of life" in the Greek OT in Gen 2 and 3. It is also the same word used often for "tree" by NT apostles in Acts and Peter in referring to the cross.
 - c. Also notice that in OT symbolism the lampstand was a (almond) tree of sorts, and in the Zechariah vision it was fed by the olive trees.
8. "paradise of God"
 - a. A "paradise" was originally a walled royal garden, a place of peace belonging to the king.
 - b. There was a tradition in Ephesus of such a garden surrounding the temple of Artemis and this garden gave asylum to thieves and criminals. This garden too had trees that bore all kinds of edible fruit. Trouble was, this was a sanctuary which protected them from the law and their presence corrupted the city. There was a history of various crackdowns when the lawlessness got out of hand.
 - c. Now imagine John giving this image and contrasting these two gardens. One gives asylum to criminals to continue in their criminality corrupting the entire city. Compare that with another garden which also offers asylum, but not to continue in one's crime but to be free from it and in fact it blesses the entire city and yields a city that is perfect, the Holy City, the New Jerusalem (end of the book). That image would preach to the people of Ephesus.