

The Church at Ephesus: The Fallen Church

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[0:00] Some of these churches needed a word of rebuke.

If you know anything about the letters to the seven churches, you know that all but, I think we could safely say one of them, has rebuke him.

And so, some of the churches, these churches in Asia Minor, these real life churches that met on Sunday just like we do and had other ministries just like we do and so forth, they needed a word of rebuke.

Alright? Some of them needed a word of encouragement. And you have that also in the letters. Some would say, maybe for the exception of one of the letters, it's difficult to find any encouragement.

We'll get to that by and by. But, they're all mixed with not only rebuke, but also encouragement. And then third, some of them needed a word of divine warning.

[1:10] Divine warning. And we'll see a little bit of that here. At least the implication of warning coming from God. And I would say also, in each letter, there is a special word to the overcomer.

The overcomer. And I'm not going to get into the meaning of that term and the identity of the overcomers.

Not tonight. We will spend some time on that because there's some questions about that. Alright, so. These are, then, let's make sure we understand.

These are seven actual letters. Let me just like you write a letter. I would write a letter. Of course, it's hard to prepare.

These letters, the letter you would write. None of my letters are inspired by the Holy Spirit. But, these are seven actual letters written by a man who actually lived in the first century.

[2:11] Who was who? John. John. That would be the Apostle John. Beloved Apostle. And, they were written to seven real life churches in Asia Minor. I don't imagine anyone in this group would question any of that.

Now, having said that, it might interest you to know that there is another way to view these letters. I bet there are two other ways. Second, these letters contain truths and spiritual applications that are still valid for the church today.

So, though these churches were real life churches that met, assembled together, did ministry, you know, involved in the Great Commission, with various degrees, real life churches that existed 2,000 years ago.

Don't let that remove us from the intent of teaching here. That the Holy Spirit is using these letters also to give us truths and spiritual applications that are valid for us.

But, before Jesus Christ says to these literal churches, seven literal churches in Asia Minor, He says to this literal church in Barnleston. So, we need to approach these letters in that way.

[3:38] And, as we study each of the letters, I, of course, will try to make some applications for our church and the church in general in our day.

Now, why then? Is there a word here for our church? Because the conditions He addresses in these seven churches, these seven actual churches, are conditions that exist in the church today.

Same thing. History just continues to repeat itself. And the things that He needs to deal with in these churches, He deals with, needs to deal with in our church. Because the same problems exist today.

So, we can say, then, these letters are still relevant today. Alright, that's the bottom line. Then, there's a third way we should view these letters. And, I would say to you, not everyone agrees on this point.

But, I would say that these letters provide a prophetic look at the history of the church. I would suggest to you that these seven churches represent seven eras of the church.

[4:49] From when the church was first established to the church that exists today. And, so, each church represents a different era in the history of the church.

And, I've given to you this, kind of the way these are identified by John Phillips. Are you familiar with John Phillips in his commentaries?

He's not written a commentary. I was very good at the school. He's written some of the whole testers as well. But, they're really quite good. They're not in-depth commentaries.

But, I like the way he presents this. And, I wish, really, I had thought maybe we would take some time to maybe flesh this out a little bit more. But, I'll flesh it out some.

And, I want to focus so much on this and not get to the letter. But, I've given those seven to you.

And, here's how he sees or identifies these eras of church history.

[5:56] And, you can kind of make some notes if you want to. To help you kind of flesh this out. Ephesus, of course, is a post-apostolic church. It's the first one. And, so, if these letters represent eras in church history.

Then, the first one must represent the first at the very beginning of the church. And, so, he calls it the post-apostolic church. That means after the apostles, of course, are gone from the scene.

Even though John is obviously writing these things. But, it's pretty easy, I think, if you do any amount of studying about the church. And, really, you can even get an indication of this from the New Testament letters.

That, even toward the close of the apostolic era, there was a gradual kind of cooling toward the Lord in the church.

And, they were dealing with all kinds of issues. And, issues that, by the way, Paul addressed in some of these churches. And, so, Ephesus, as we're going to see, is that church that fell from their first love.

[7:06] And, at least John Phillips thinks, I think he's on to something here. Represents that post-apostolic church. Smyrna, the persecuted church.

And, of course, that would be the era of the church. And, in fact, I think under his rule, ten very severe years of persecution.

So, Smyrna represents the persecuted church. Pergamos, John Phillips says, or names it, identifies it as the patronized church.

You have in that letter the phrase, the doctrine of Balaam. And, we'll talk about this when we get to this letter. But, the doctrine of Balaam, if you remember that. And, that kind of sums this up, this idea that the doctrine of Balaam basically says, if you remember anything about that story in the Old Testament, it says, if you cannot curse them, then corrupt them.

That's basically the doctrine of Balaam. And, that's what Balaam did. Remember, it was the Old Testament prophet Balaam that convinced, or led, convinced Balak to kind of, you know, unite men of Israel with the women of Moab.

[8:46] And, so, there was this kind of unholy wedding between God's people and pagans. And, so, it led to a corruption of God's people.

And, that's basically, put in a nutshell, the story about Balaam. So, that doctrine of Balaam is mentioned in the letter. And, John Phillips makes a connection there between Balaam and what he did and Constantine.

And, so, that would be the era of the patronized church, the era when Constantine wedded the state of the church. And, a kind of unholy wedding, which was not healthy at all, of course.

Then, we have Thyatira. The era he calls the papal church. The papal church. And, the phrase, that woman of Jezebel, that woman Jezebel, rather, that helps identify this particular era.

Now, you remember Jezebel. She was a pagan who was married to probably the worst king Israel ever had, Ahab. But, Jezebel really was the one sitting on the throne and pulling the strings.

[9:58] And, she was a pagan. And, she effectively made paganism the natural religion of Israel. And, so, this is prophetic. It made the connection in church history, prophetic of that era, the rise of Catholicism.

And, that came on the scene shortly after the reign of Constantine. And, during that time, we would have what generally called the dark ages of church history.

And, the church became, effectively, the center of the church. And, where paganism was baptized.

We could characterize it that way. And, it was baptized, so to speak, and incorporated into Christianity. So, pagan feasts became Christian feasts.

Pagan holidays, Christian holidays. Pagan gods became Christian saints, and so forth. So, Thyatira could represent that era, the rise of Catholicism, the pagan church.

[11:05] And, Sardis would be the Protestant church. That, obviously, came after the era of Catholicism, the dominance of Catholicism.

The Protestant church, the era of the Reformation. And, this era in church history had, I think we could say, a good beginning in the Reformation.

And, men like Luther, Wycliffe, Knox, Calvin, and a number of others we could mention. But, that soon gave way, though, to dead and dry orthodoxy.

Very shortly after the Reformation. And, so Jesus said of this church era, in chapter 3, verse 4, he said, I know your works, that you have a name, that you are alive, but you're dead.

And, so, he sees this as being the era of the Protestant church. Philadelphia, he calls it the practical church. Does that make you notice that John Phillips, man, after my heart, called this liberation?

[12:15] Sometimes it gets a little vague. I'm not sure what he means by the practical church. But, anyway, you've got it there. It's not mine, it's his. And, but, alright, so this church, this church, the church in Philadelphia, was prophetic of the era of revivalism.

And, spiritual awakenings. And, also, modern missions, what we would call modern missions, that came on the scene in those days under men like Wesleys, and Whitfield, Edwards, Moody, and Carey, and Livingston, and what other names do you think of?

Taylor, Jetson, here at modern missions. And, the idea being that God brought the church back to himself.

So, we have the papal era that led to the Protestant era that kind of tailed off into dry dead orthodoxy.

And, then comes great revival, spiritual awakening, that fueled missions. And, you know, God, in a sense, thrust his people out to reach a lost world.

[13:30] And, finally, we have Laodicea, which he calls the present-day church. The church age that we are in right now.

And, which is described in the letter as a little born. Neither hot or cold. Rich materially, but poor spiritually, and blind and naked.

And, if you remember that letter, you're probably more familiar with the letter. You're allowed to see it. You see a church that we talk about it so much. Preachers like to talk about it. And, it certainly does seem to be descriptive of the church today.

Now, not every church. Alright? We're talking about it. An era of church history. We're not talking about each individual church, and what may or may not be happening there.

But, in general, this is descriptive of these eras in the church. And, so, I would add to that that John Phillips, and I don't think I put this in your notes, but you could scribble something down if you want.

[14:33] But, John Phillips sees that the first four church eras that we mentioned here, the post-apostolic, persecuted church, the patronized church, the papal church, those first four are prophetic of church histories that have occurred successively.

That means one era gave way to the next. And, you know, one era ends and the other begins. So, there's no overlap. These are distinctive, separated ages.

We go from one to the next to the next to the next. Then, starting with the fourth era of this papal church, and continuing through to the other eras, they seem to run side by side.

That is, for example, Thyatira, the papal church, still exists today. Right? I mean, if you follow John Phillips' scheme here, you think he's on the right track.

The papal church still exists today. We still have Catholicism. Sardis, the Protestant church, still exists today. And Philadelphia, the practical church, he calls it, still exists today.

[15:49] And, of course, the Laodicean church, the present-day church, also still exists today. So, you know, there are churches on this planet that fit, you know, that fit in one of those four categories.

Maybe not really neatly, but I think you can do that. All right. So, that's kind of an introduction to the letters.

And now let's get to the letters. The letter to the church at Ephesus, which I've called here in our notes the fallen church. The fallen church, I mean, that just comes right out of the text.

If you just see what Jesus has to say to them. I mean, just to begin by reading verse 1, to the angel of the church at Ephesus.

Right. Now, who's this angel? Well, I don't know. I choose to believe that the angel of the church is the breakfast of the pastor. Not everybody reads the pastor.

[16:52] Some would say it'd be some specific guardian angel of that church. And there are at least, I think, five other theories. But that's not all that you made to our study here tonight.

So, we'll go on. These things say it says, he holds the seven stars in his right hand. Who are they? Well, it depends on what you say the angel of the church is on.

If it's the pastors, then the seven stars are the pastors. If it's some angel, then it's angels. Let's go on. Who walks in midst of the seven golden lampstands.

Now, that, very little confusion about the lampstands. That's a representation of the church, churches. All right. And then he says, I know. All right.

That's where we want to stop for a minute. He says, I know some things. All right. I'm interested. It's addressed to the church at Ephesus. You know, and so forth.

[17:52] And I know. I know something that I want you to, I want to tell you. And really, when you take that introduction to the letters, the imagery is pretty clear.

You'll see Jesus has the pastors in his hand. He dwells with his people, people in his church. Walking among them, he dwells with them.

And he's inspecting. He's inspecting his church. Inspecting what is going on in his churches. And he knows. He knows all about them. He knows everything about our church.

He knows more than you know. More than I know. Certainly more than we would comfortably admit. And so forth. But he knows. All right.

Now, in the case of the church at Ephesus, we're focusing on this particular letter. What does he know about that? Well, there are three things I think we can see in the letter.

[18:51] First of all, he knows the faithful works of this church. The faithful works of this church. Verse 2, I know is what I know.

Your works. I know your works. Your labor. Your patience. And that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not.

And have found them liars. All right. So he knows these things. These are words of commendation. But the negative here, this church has some pluses here in Jesus' re-valuation.

So, all right. So what do these verses tell us? Well, the church of Ephesus tells us that the church of Ephesus was a very active church. Very active. And how active?

Well, first of all, they were standing up to the task that God had given them to do. That's a church. They were standing up to the task of being at church.

[19:53] He said, I know your works, your labor, your patience. All those pertain to work. In fact, it's almost redundant. The word patience, I think, really would be better translated as endurance.

Endurance. You're sticking to it. And so, really, when you put all three of those words together, you don't have just, it's not just work. You know, I know your work, but it's hard work.

Who's a hard-working church? The church of Ephesus. And, in fact, we really could translate this. I know your labor unto weariness. You are a hard-working church. Strenuous work. Exhausting work.

And Jesus took note of this about this church. Now, use your imagination. Imagine what it must have sounded like on a typical Sunday morning.

[20:56] I found this illustration rather amusing. See if I can read it. It's a little rough in some places. But imagine someone in the church at Ephesus standing up on Sunday morning, some distinguished man.

And he stands up and says, he's about to give the announcements. And here are the announcements. Immediately after this service, we'll be in prayer meeting. The sisters will meet in the annex next morning.

The brethren will meet on the patio outside. At 11 o'clock, the family Bible hour will begin. And the Sunday school division of the family aisle will meet in the school of Tyrannus across the street.

The adults will meet here. The gospel will be preached this morning by our brother Alexander from Cyrene. Our aged brother is the son of the well-known Simon, remember, who carried the cross for our board and who joined in Paul's original commendation to the mission field.

We're privileged to have our brother Alexander with us today. And he will also speak tonight at the evening service at 7 p.m. This afternoon at 2.30, there will be a street meeting to be conducted outside the temple of Artemis.

[22:02] Christians in the fellowship will recall that this weekend brings many pilgrims to Ephesus to partake in the pagan festival of Artemis. We suggest that those who, like Gideon's 22,000, are afraid to get involved, you should stay home.

We only want those who are activated by holy boldness to attend. The young people's meeting will convene at 4.30 p.m. Brother Simon Ben-Joseph from Jerusalem will be giving an illustrated talk on the holy hand.

There will be a choir practice after the service this evening. Brother David Ben-Cora has written a new Christmas cantata. All choir members should make a special effort to attend since parts of this cantata are to be assigned this afternoon.

The tract club will meet in the home of Brother Hermes tomorrow night. The new tract has been received from Brother Marcellus of Rome.

All who can wield a pin will be needed to begin making copies of this tract for distribution. The weekly prayer meeting will be held on Tuesday evening. We need to pray earnestly for the activities of this church.

[23:08] Last week attendance at the prayer meeting was very poor. The weekly Bible class meets one hour after sundown on Wednesday evening. We're studying the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans.

Those who possess a copy of this scroll are requested to bring it to the meeting. There will be an elders' meeting at the closing Bible class. All elders should make a special effort to be present. We're going to have an interview with James of Antioch to consider the proposal that we install some new pews in the auditorium. The ladies' Dorcas class meeting will be held this week in the home of Sister Phoebe.

The sisters are sewing for Brother Gaius and his family serving the Lord in Egypt. The Youth Challenge Rally will be held Saturday near Bonpire Square. We're expecting young people to be with us from Sardis and Thyatira and Philadelphia.

The Youth Challenge speaker will be our honored brother, Fortunatus, who was recently condemned to die in the arena in Rome, but who was reprieved at the last moment.

[24:18] There will be a potluck fellowship supper on Saturday. The sisters will see about the food. Let us try to bring our unsaved friends and neighbors to that supper. There will be a testimony meeting after the meeting.

Phew! What a bunch of announcements. It is probably even worse than that. I mean, they're just a very busy, busy, busy church.

All right, so the church at Ephesus was an active church. They were standing up to the task. That's the first thing. They were busy with the Lord's work. Next, they were standing up for the truth.

They were standing up for the truth. The Lord also commends them on this. They were standing, first of all, standing against immorality in the church. He said, I know that you cannot bear those who are evil.

Now, the idea here is not those out in the world somewhere, but those in the church. You're not barren with them. You're not just, you know, winking at that and letting that go on.

[25:19] You cannot bear to have immorality in the church. So this was a church that did not tolerate any of that in their church body, no matter what form it took.

I mean, I don't know the specifics here, but they were standing up for the truth. They're not going to tolerate any of that. Also, you could say that they were standing against false leadership in the church.

He said, I know this about you. You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not. In this sense, it could be a non-technical use of the word apostle, meaning those who are called or sent by God.

Or it could mean those who claim to be actual apostles, even self-apostles. He said, you test all those who claim to be apostles and are not, and you have found them liars.

So that they're very particular, very interested in testing those who claim to have some authority to teach or lead or anything like that, who are false.

[26:30] And it's commending them for this. And so this was a church that did not tolerate church leaders who had a false profession. Either they were unsaved, and they made sure about that.

They had a false faith, a profession of faith. Or even those uncalled, in the sense that they had a false profession of calling to the ministry.

In fact, when you get on into the letter, verse 6, you have given there the most specific example.

And there's a reason why I think that is brought up later on in the letter.

And if I can remember, I'll tell you. I mean, if I can remember when I get to that part of the letter, I know why, but I want to put it together. The specific example here is in verse 6.

You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans. I think you're probably the right pronunciation. Which I also hate. Now, who are these?

[27:30] Well, we don't really know exactly. There are some ideas about it. I think it's clear that they probably were self-appointed apostles or disciples with a high status of leadership.

And they claimed this, and it wasn't true. We don't know what they were teaching about. We will talk a little bit more about this when we get a letter to the church of the church.

It's mentioned there again. Though we don't know what they were teaching, it's pretty clear by what Jesus says about them, that not only was their apostleship false, their claim to be spiritual leaders was false, but their teaching was also false.

And the Greek word, by the way, Nikolaos, kind of root of this word, means the destroyer of the people. So this is a group of people in the body of the church in Ephesus, claiming to be leaders, but they were not qualified leaders, and they were teaching things that were destroying the people.

All right, so they were standing up to the task, standing up to the truth. And then third, he commends them, he knows this about them, they were standing up to the test.

[28:55] The test, verse 3. You have persevered, and have patience, and have labored for my name's sake, and have not become weary.

That's a pretty good combination for the church. These people labored. These people labored. I already mentioned that you knew them for their works, their labor, their endurance, perseverance. They didn't just work. They worked really hard. They worked relentlessly. And then added to that, they withstood opposition, but they did not faint.

They did not give up, no matter what happened. And they had plenty of opposition from the outside, of course, all churches did in those days. It would be today. But even opposition from within.

And they did not faint. They did not give up on them. Now, you know, you hear all this, and some might catch themselves thinking, well, I don't know that I would join that church.

[30:03] Because, number one, they work their people too hard. They're working laboriously, relentlessly, and, you know, they work too hard.

And in some people's minds, you know, I wouldn't join that church because they're too dogmatic, too intolerant, evil, sin.

And so that might be the consensus of some. And yet we have to know that God was commending them and not criticizing them.

The 21st century church, I think, could learn something from this level. A lot of things. Because today, for example, you know, typically, it varies, of course, from church to church.

But typically, the bad age anyway is that 20% of the members should do 100% of the work, 20% or less. And that's pretty typical across the board of those churches.

[31:07] And also, we have to make this application today. The typical church, sadly in America anyway, does pay close attention to the qualification of their leaders, their leadership.

I mean, from the pastor to every area of leadership. We're not as careful attention as we should about examining their qualifications, examining whether or not they give evidence their calling, their calling from the Lord.

And we're just kind of more willing to say, well, you know, we've got a spot to fill. And you're willing. So why don't you take this group of kids over here and start teaching them the Bible.

We don't really even check to make sure, as we should, whether, number one, they are walking with the Lord and know His Word.

I mean, we're all learners, continue to be learners. But we should at least have reached a certain level of maturity spiritually and a certain level of knowledge in the Bible before we were placed in a position of leadership, especially in the area of teaching.

[32 : 23] And so it's just all too typical of churches in this age, and especially in the West, in America particularly, to just not scrutinize leaders.

And then also I think you'd have to say that today, tolerance toward sin, open sin, unrepentant of sin, in the church is more or less the rule of any church.

And it's, you know, not just that we don't want to deal with it. It is that. Because it's hard to deal with it. I mean, it's very hard.

Yeah, we don't want to offend. We don't want to, you know, just membership. We don't want to know most of it. But it's not just that. It really is going to be a place where we don't even want to know it.

In fact, it would be better if we didn't know it. So these things that the Lord commended the church in Ephesus for, we can harm them.

[33 : 26] All right, so that's the first thing that Jesus knows. He knows the faithful works of this church. Let's see if I can give you one more, and then I'll save the third one for next time, and then we'll get into the next church.

Second, he knows the fatal weakness of this church. Verses 4 through 5, Nevertheless, I have this against you.

I have not given you commendation. But it begins with that. And then he said, That said, I have a few things that I'm concerned about.

I have a few things he said, Actually, I'm against you. That you have left your first love. That identifies really all he's going to say left. Next, he says, Remember, therefore, from where you fall. Repent, and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly. Remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. All right, so we have, you know, he's identified, really rebuking, in a very general sense, their primary weakness.

[34 : 33] They had lost their first love. That's what he said. But this little quote there, and he said it, that the furnace was still there, but the fire had gone in.

And that's very descriptive of the churches today. It's interesting, I think, to know that the church at Ephesus was the only church in the New Testament to which two apostles wrote letters.

We have this letter, John, the Welshman, and Paul. He wrote letters. And what's interesting is the stark contrast between the two. Paul, for example, wrote in Ephesians 2, verse 5 and 6, he's speaking to the church there, and he says that the Lord has quickened us together with Christ, raised us up together, made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, to be in the church at Ephesus.

And then John wrote later, he said, remember, therefore, from where you have fallen. So, on the one hand, it raised you up, and we know there's a spiritual difference here, too.

But then John says, you have fallen. So something happened, I think is the indication. They had fallen from where, from the place, where they were, when Paul.

[35 : 57] And we can identify two things. They had lost their passion. They had lost their passion. He said, you left your first love. Did you know that, sure you do, that it's possible to serve God, and serve his church, need to be successful at it, even, by all indication, outward indication, be effective at it, and all the while, not really love Jesus.

You know that's possible? Of course it is. The truth is, everything we do, as a church, or even as individual believers, everything that we do, quote, for Jesus, end quote, that is not motivated by love for him, is in the end, works.

If we do anything without love, because if, I mean, the implication is, if we're not doing it because we love him, then for whom are we? For ourselves.

We need for ourselves to elevate ourselves, and so forth. So, if we do anything, in the name of Christ, for him, for his church, that's not motivated by love, it really has no eternal value.

That's something to think of. And this is his chief complaint. They're busy, very busy, and in a sense, commended them for the fact that they, they, they just would never give up.

[37 : 38] And yet, there was this fatal weakness. They had fallen from their first love. They had lost their passion. Second, they had also lost their profession.

Their profession, their profession, had become all but needy. They had lost their profession. I'll put an example here. I don't think I put it in your notes.

It's a red bone. In 1 Kings 14, you remember something about that story. He, he, he come to the throne, a red bone, and he said, he was a very foolish king.

And, he, so God humbled him. And what did God do? A number of things. But he allowed the enemy to steal the gold shields that Solomon had made for the, for the temple guards. Apparently, that was a solid gold shield. The enemy had stolen them, and God allowed that. And so, what did Ray of all do? He made some shields to take their place. [38 : 42] He made them out of brass instead of gold. They looked gold. They kind of glistened in the sun like the old, but they were brass. They were counterfeits. And, it's descriptive of what a lot of churches have done.

We profess, have a profession of Christ, but, since we have, we have left our love for him, it's all been turned inward, then, you know, when we lose something that's of eternal value, rich, we substitute with something else.

Something that's earthly. Something that's temporal. And, that's what's happened in a lot of churches today. Someone has put it this way, the enemy has been allowed to steal away the gold of genuine devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many a church has tried to replace it with brass pieces. They, they, they got to replace the gold, precious gold, of true devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, and instead, since we've lost that, come up with a counterfeit, which for us is typically business, just business, activities, programs, various kinds of ways of promotion, you know, kind of Madison Avenue, techniques, buildings, buses, budgets, you know, and, now, all those things are useful, but, in a secondary sense, they're not substitutes for true devotion to the Lord, loving Him, loving His Word, loving worship, doing that as supreme in our lives.

So, when you substitute that for these other things, then, we miss it. Thank you.