

Why of What – Revelation 2:1-7

Read Text • A Letter from Jesus

1. You go out to get the mail one day. There in the stack of bills & ads is a hand-written letter.
2. You get so many emails, letters are rare.
3. So you set the bills & ads aside, looking carefully at the letter's envelope.
 - a. It's addressed to you; the return address just says "Jesus."
 - b. You smile. It's gotta' be from a friend, pulling a joke.
 - c. You wonder which friend it is, and what you can do to get even.
4. You open it and withdraw a single piece of folded paper on which a neat hand has written a couple short paragraphs.
 - a. It begins, "My Beloved" your name.
 - b. But as you read on, you realize it's not a **joke**; it's not funny. It's not trying to be.
 - c. It contains a few words of commendation about your growth in grace & your faithfulness to the Lord.
 - d. But the second paragraph mentions a secret you're ashamed of; a compromise you've made.
 - e. And you're positive **no one** knows about it.
 - f. The last line of the letter calls you to repent & receive God's forgiveness.
 - g. It's simply signed, "Your Forever Friend, Jesus."
5. FREAKY!
6. What we're looking at today is THAT; a letter Jesus sent, not an individual, but a Church.
7. In fact, over the next several weeks, we're going to examine letters Jesus sent 7 churches.
 - a. They're the 7 mentioned in ch. 1.
 - b. The cities they were in form a rough oval in what today is the nation of Turkey; in that day called the Roman province of Asia Minor.
8. The **first** letter Jesus dictated to John while imprisoned on the island of Patmos was to **Ephesus**.

V7

1. We begin w/the last verse of the letter – 7.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."
2. All 7 letters repeat this.
3. You see, while **each** letter deals with issues specific to the congregation it's addressed to,
4. Jesus wanted **each** letter read by the others. He wanted them to **read each other's mail!**
5. He wanted the other churches to know where a church was **both**
 - 1) Doing well,
 - 2) And where it had gotten off track.
 - a. They were to rejoice over success –
 - b. And pray for change where it was needed.
 - c. They were to hold each other accountable.
 - d. That is > They were **share their struggles** & encourage each other to greater faithfulness.
6. There are aspects of our American culture that both encourage & hinder our walk with Christ.
 - a. A lack of persecution means we get to own a Bible & go to whatever church we want without fear of being arrested or beaten.
 - b. But the heavy emphasis on **individualism & privacy** work against the **community** that's an essential part of the Christian Faith & Life.
 - c. Many of us think it's none of anyone's business how we're doing in our walk; that it's between God & me.
 - d. If you've read the NT, especially Paul's letters, you know that isn't the case.
 - e. We DON'T follow Jesus alone; we follow together.
 - f. We're all members of One Body & a part of one another.
 - 1) When one hurts, all hurt.
 - 2) When one is edified, all are built up.
 - g. We ARE responsible for one another!
 - h. My struggle is yours & yours, mine.
7. This is why honesty between us is so important.

8. The Christians in Smyrna, Pergamos, & Laodicea were supposed to read Jesus' letter to Ephesus & know about where they were doing good as well as where they needed to change.
9. Jesus wants you & I to know too – because the message ***is for us as well***.
 - a. You see Jesus **DID** write you a letter; 7 of them!
 - b. Chances are, as you walk with Him over the years, you'll find something in every one of them that applies to you.

V1

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the 7 stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the 7 golden lampstands:

1. In each of the letters, Jesus uses ***a part*** of the vision John had of Him in His glory in ch1.
2. ***How*** He describes Himself fits His message to ***that*** church.
3. Here, He's the one who holds 7 stars & walks among 7 golden lampstands.
4. What those stars & lampstands represented is explained at the end of ch1.
 - a. The ***stars*** are the angels of the 7 churches.
 - b. The ***lampstands*** are the churches themselves.
5. We won't go into the symbolism now because we did that in our last study.
6. What we ***do*** need to do is take a closer look at that word "angel."
 - a. Our English word comes from the Grk word for ***messenger*** = ***angelos***.
 - b. ***God's messenger*** to the Church at Ephesus wasn't a heavenly angel; it was their ***pastor***.
 - c. Jesus didn't need to dictate a letter to John if He had a message for an angel!
 - d. At that time, most people were illiterate.
 - e. When Christians gathered, their pastor read & taught the Scriptures.
 - f. When a letter arrived from one of the Apostles, he read it to the congregation.
7. Jesus' description of Himself as the One Who holds the stars & walks in the midst of the lampstands was a ***potent double whammy*** for the Christians at Ephesus.

1st) Later He's going to warn them that unless they repent, He's going to remove their lampstand. They'll cease to be a church! And Jesus holds the pastor responsible to take heed to the message and make whatever corrections are needed.

2nd) Coins from this time show the Roman Emperor Domitian holding 7 stars.

As we saw in our last study, Domitian claimed to be a god and demanded worship.

He was the first Emperor to do so; & was furious the Christians wouldn't.

So he called for an empire wide persecution. That's why John was imprisoned on Patmos.

That persecution had effected the Church at Ephesus.

So Jesus reminded them who the ***real*** God is.

He holds the stars; not the pretended Domitian.

Vs2-3 & 6 • Commendation

² "I know your works,

1. Let's pause there for a moment.
 - a. Let's say you arrived early, came in & sat down when there were only a few seated.
 - b. Then Pastor Sid came, sat next to you, leaned over & said quietly, "I know your works."
 - c. Would that distress or comfort you?
 - d. It would probably depend on what you were thinking about just then; what you'd done recently & were mentally reviewing.
 - 1) If you'd just done something ***nice***, you'd be comforted, gratified.
 - 2) But if you'd just done something ***embarrassing***, you'd be bummed.
2. Jesus says to us what He said to the Ephesians, "I know your works."

- a. He knows all about what's going on.

- b. He not only knows ***WHAT*** we do, He knows ***WHY*** we do it.

3. So, what's Jesus going to say next? Is it a word of ***commendation or correction***?

"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; ³ and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

4. Whew! Jesus **commends** them for their diligence & perseverance.
 - a. That word “labor” means **hard work**; the kind that causes perspiration.
 - b. And it wasn’t a **flash in the pan**, flurry of activity that lasted for a moment then was over.
 - c. They stayed in harness; they kept the apron & gloves on & worked patiently!
 - d. The Ephesians weren’t a bunch of lazy slackers.
 - e. This was a busy church; there was a lot going on over the long haul.
 5. And they took the call to **holiness** seriously.
 - a. Like every church, they had **posers**; people who **claimed** to be Christians but weren’t.
 - b. When their lifestyle proved they were frauds, the genuine believers called them to get with the program or beat it.
 6. Jesus also commends them for their **defense of the truth**.
 - a. They **tested** what they heard against the Word of God.
 - b. There were a lot of itinerant teachers at this time, making the **church circuit**.
 - c. Some claimed to be **apostles** on the same level as Peter & Paul.
 - d. The Ephesians didn’t assume everyone who **claimed** to be an apostle **was**.
 - e. They evaluated what they heard by holding it up to God’s Word.
 - f. When it didn’t measure up, they called false teachers what they were: Lairs.
 7. Jesus commends them for one more thing in v. 6
- But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
8. There’s some discussion among students of the Bible over just WHO Jesus refers to here.
 - a. You see, there’s no group history has identified as a heretical sect called the Nicolaitans.
 - b. We have the name of dozens of others aberrant groups that popped up in the early centuries of the church – but none of them were called by this label.
 - c. This is what JESUS called them; It’s His name for them.
 9. Since these guys are called out again in v15 when Jesus writes to the church at Pergamos, we’ll leave figuring out who they were till then.
 10. Doesn’t Ephesus sound like a good church so far?
 - a. They’re doctrinally sound, busy; & committed to holiness.
 - b. We know the Church at Ephesus was **large**, with hundreds, maybe even a few thousand members.
 - 1) The City of Ephesus was the premier City of Asia Minor.
 - 2) It had a population of about a ¼ million, a theater that sat 25,000, & 1 of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World - the magnificent Temple of Artemis; **3Xs** the size of the Parthenon in Athens!
 - 3) Ephesus was a major port where East met West so there was something for everyone and every taste there.
 - 4) Prostitution was legal & encouraged because it was part of their pagan religious ritual.
 - c. Listen: As a Christian, Ephesus was a tough place to live because of the highly-cultured immorality.
 - d. But the Church was doing well!
 - 1) It had a strong pulpit where the pastor brought it.
 - 2) And they had so much going on the bulletin was 8 pages.
 11. I want to go to that church!
 12. But wait: Jesus isn’t finished.
 - a. Remember, He knows their works;
 - b. Not just what they do, but the why of their what.

Vs4-5 – Complaint & Correction

⁴ Nevertheless --

1. It’s a good news / bad news deal. He’s given the good news; now comes the bad.
2. **Nevertheless** “All that’s commendable stands in peril because of what’s wrong. For what’s wrong causes all that’s good **to be seen in a different light**.”

Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.

3. Jesus sees all the hard, patient work; the moral carefulness, the concern for truth. It **looks** great.
4. But He sees **beyond the exterior** to the heart; to **WHY** they’ve been doing it all.
5. And He knows, there is no WHY any more, the **why** is missing.
6. They’ve **left** their first love.

- a. Not “lost.” They didn’t **misplace** it, like a set of keys. “Where’d I leave my 1st love?”
 - b. The word means to **let go** of something; to **release** it.
 - c. There is in this word “left” the idea of **neglect**; of turning away.
- 6a. In the midst of all their busyness, they’d let go of the **reason** for it all.
7. You build a gorgeous ranch house; prize-winning architecture, gloriously landscaped, pool in the backyard.
- a. But there’s **no interior**; no cement slab, just dirt.
 - b. No interior walls, just framing; no plumbing or electrical.
 - c. That’s not a house, it’s a façade!
 - d. You can’t live there. But from outside, it looks good.
8. That’s the Church at Ephesus; a **spiritual façade** w/o what’s needed for Jesus to **live** there.

Look at His warning in v5 ...

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.

9. Forsaking their first love was **so** serious, so distressing, Jesus warned if they didn’t turn things around **immediately**, they’d lose their status **as a church**.
- a. Oh, they could leave the sign out front “Ephesus Christian Fellowship” & go on w/all their busyness; but He’d leave.
 - b. They can **call themselves** a church, **but He wouldn’t**.
10. It all hinged on them returning to their first love.
11. The 1st love of the believer is for Jesus. // Our love for Him is born of His love for us.
- a. That love is kindled the moment we’re born again.
 - b. The Gospel is the offer of an intimate love relationship w/God because of what Jesus has done.
12. A good way to understand what Jesus says here comes thru the example of what happens in some marriages.
- a. Ben & Sally met in high school. // They dated for a few yrs & got married in their early 20’s.
 - b. They were so in love & affectionate their friends poked fun at them; but they didn’t care.
 - c. They did **everything** together!
 - d. **3 yrs** into the marriage, they had their 1st child.
 - e. Ben made enough for them to live on & though tight, they agreed Sally would stay home.
 - f. **A couple yrs** later they had another child.
 - g. Ben was a hard worker & got a couple promotions; more responsibility meant more hours.
 - h. But Sally was preoccupied w/the kids.
 - i. **15 yrs** pass & 1 night they’re back to back in bed, wide awake.
 - j. Though they don’t know what the other is thinking, both realize the love that marked their 1st yrs is gone.
 - k. They’ve settled into a routine.
 - l. Now – they’re comfortable w/1 another, but comfortable is a poor substitute for the passion & joy they used to share.
 - m. As Sally reviews, it bothers her it took till just then for her to realize how her feelings had changed. She loved Ben, but she wasn’t **IN love** w/him.
 - n. Ben’s lying there thinking much the same thing. // He’s devoted to Sally & the kids.
 - 1) But the **urgency** just to be w/her, to talk & do things together that marked those early times has been gone for a while.
 - 2) And it bothers him he hadn’t realized it **till just then**.
13. There weren’t any major problems that caused their love for each other to wane.
- a. Both are still faithful to their vow.
 - b. They’ve just allowed the **stuff of daily life** to pull them apart.
14. That scenario gets played out in many marriages.
- a. The fervent love that marked the 1st yrs gets eclipsed by other things.
 - b. And the love that **fueled all the energy** of the early days gets replaced **by the habit of mere routine**.

15. That's what happened in the Church at Ephesus.
 - a. Their **love for God** is what **moved them** in the early days.
 - b. They lived **out of** an intense love for Jesus.
 - c. But then, w/o realizing it, what they were doing eclipsed why they were doing it.
 - d. They **took** their eyes off Jesus & put them on what they assumed He **expected** of them.
 - e. They turned response into responsibilities; expectancy into expectations.
16. Don't miss that; it's key! It captures the essence of Jesus' words here.
They turned the living verbs of loving into dead nouns of duty.
17. So Jesus sends them an urgent warning. "Where's the why in your what?"
 - a. **Remember** how it used to be? Remember the fervor & passion of the early days?
 - b. When you loved My Word & couldn't get enough of it?
 - c. When you couldn't wait to get together w/My people to worship Me?
 - d. **Remember** driving along, singing w/the CD at the top of your lungs, "Blessed be Your name, in the land that is plentiful ..."
 - e. **Remember? When it was all about ME?**
18. **Go back to that place** & do it **like THAT** again.
19. For Sally & Ben, as they lie there, realizing their feelings have changed, both know what to do.
 - a. They're lying back to back; they need to turn around & face each other.
 - b. They need to look into each other's eyes & say, "I love you."
 - c. "I'm sorry I've let **routine replace romance**; the stuff of daily life to interfere w/**why** I chose this life w/you in the first place."
 - d. "It was **about** you. And here & now, I come back TO YOU!"
20. They're both going to get up the next morning & do pretty much the same things they'd done the day before, but now it'll be for the right reason.
21. This allusion to marriage as an illustration of Jesus' message to the church at Ephesus is perfect because the **word** 'Ephesus' means = "Darling."
 - a. Jesus says to His Church, "My Darling, I appreciate all **your work**, but I'd much rather have **You!**"
 - b. In 2 Cor. 11:2-3 the Apostle Paul wrote

I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to 1 husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

22. My precious friends **It's all about Jesus!**

V7

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

1. We have ears. So let's hear & heed what Jesus said to Ephesus.
2. Jesus finishes the letter with a promise to those who do so.
 - a. He'll feast us on the fruit of eternal life.
 - b. Can I be honest & say, I'm not sure exactly what that means.
 - c. But it sure sounds good & I want it!

CONCLUSION

1. We end with this illustration.
2. Guys, in order to make this work, I need to ask you to imagine this from the woman's perspective.
3. Did you go to your senior prom? Imagine this scenario . . .
 - a. Your date is the hunkiest guy in school. And he's rich & has impeccable taste.
 - b. He bought you a gorgeous prom dress that fits like a glove. You look good!
 - c. The night comes for the dance and he picks you up in a limo.
 - d. You drive to the hall & walk in the front door together.
 - e. You make the rounds & say hi to friends. You dance a couple songs together.
 - f. You are in heaven & realize as you look into your date's eyes that you are absolutely in love.
 - g. Your heart beats faster, & you begin to perspire as you realize how perfect this moment is.
 - h. Then, after a couple more dances, a friend asks if you can help with the punch.

- i. You tell your date you'll be right back and follow your friend over to the table where the bowl is and help make the punch.
 - j. You're in a hurry. You want to get back to your date who's now standing by the wall waiting for you.
 - k. But when you finish the punch, another friend asks if you can speak to her.
 - 1) She's upset because her date left & she's now there all alone.
 - 2) So you talk to her for a few minutes & calm her down, promising to give her a ride home.
 - l. By the time you finish, more punch needs to be made.
 - m. Then the people taking prom pictures ask if you can help take down people's names.
 - n. You get tapped to pass out awards to the prom court.
 - o. Another friend needs a shoulder to cry on because her boyfriend broke up with her.
 - p. And by now you've so busy, you've forgotten about your date.
 - q. Until in a brief pause, the crowd on the dance floor parts and you see him still standing against the wall where you left him ***an hour ago***.
 - r. The look in his eyes says it all: While you've been busy, distracted by many things – He's been doing ONE thing – waiting for you.
4. Christian: This life is Senior Prom & Jesus is our date.
- a. He's clothed us in His righteousness & brought us here.
 - b. He wants to dance with us.
 - c. Yes—there is some work that needs to be done, but He wants to do it with us; together.
 - d. Don't leave Him standing by the wall.
 - e. Remember who brought you to the dance.