

Letters from Heaven ~ Study 2

“Passion Rekindled”

Revelation 2: 1-7

Introduction:

Having considered the prologue of chapter one, we move on to the first of the seven letters to the churches. The first letter Jesus tells John to write is to the church in Ephesus, the gateway to the Roman province of Asia. Ephesus was a highly prestigious and affluent city.

In Ephesus, as throughout the Roman world, the prosperity of the city and all areas of life were connected with acts of worship and sacrifice. For each trade there was a guild, and each guild had their deity, worship of whom was deemed vital for prosperity. The city was filled with stone carvings, each dedicated to some god. The Imperial Cult demanded worship of the Roman emperor as a god – Ephesus boasting a huge temple to Domitian, containing a 25m high statue of the Emperor. Ephesus also was the foremost site for the worship of Artemis, goddess of fertility, the city housing a vast temple in her honour, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Yet despite its wealth and patronage, with the silting up of its harbour, its lifeline, Ephesus' status was threatened and consequently there was even greater pressure on its citizens to play their part, their civic duty. Just imagine being a Christian in this city, trying to work, trying to be involved in the life of the city, simply trying to live, with all these requirements to worship and sacrifice to other gods.

Before reading the passage:

Brainstorm and write down some of the “powers” or “gods” of our contemporary world.

Now read the passage

v.1

Each of the seven letters begins with Jesus saying something about himself. Here Jesus gives two images. The first, of him holding the seven stars, is one of powerful transcendence.

1. Bearing in mind the context of the Ephesian church, why do you think Jesus chose this image of himself?
2. What message is given through this image of the crucified one being more powerful than all the “powers” and “gods” you just thought of?
3. Select one or two of those “powers”/“gods” and try to think what it means for it to be under the judgement of Christ.

So the first image is of transcendence. The second, of Jesus walking among the lampstands, however, is one of immanence – God chooses to walk with his

church.

4. How do you respond to the value Jesus puts on the church?

vv.2-3

5. This is a picture of a church: Try to repaint it together in your own words - what might such a church or Christian look like today?
6. How does it make you feel that Jesus “knows” your deeds?

v.4

“We mistake the journey for its end and the love of the road instead of the one who called us to walk on it.” (Marva Dawn)

7. How true is this comment in your own experience?
8. How else do we let go of our first love?

v.5

This verse seems particularly harsh, especially given that the Ephesian Christians had been faithfully persevering. Yet the imperative behind Jesus’ strong language, is his call to the priority of maintaining our first love.

9. Can you recall times when you were more passionate in your devotion to Jesus?
10. What were some of the characteristics of that time?
11. How is passion reshaped by the maturing of a relationship?
12. What would greater passion in your walk with God look like now, if you could have it?

v.7

Each of the seven letters ends with Jesus’ imploring those with ears to hear what the Spirit is saying, and promises a reward for those who overcome.

13. “the right to eat from the tree of life” ~ when you imagine this possibility, what words come to mind to describe the possible feelings, responses, reactions and outcomes?
14. In what ways do you think these might be appropriate as “rewards” for those whose first love is restored?

Prayer

Take time to pray for each other.

Further notes:

- ◆ v.1 The image of Jesus holding the seven stars has multiple references: i) it could refer to the claim of the Emperor Domitian that his son who died in infancy was now divine: Domitian minted a coin showing his son sitting on a planet and playing with the star - the point being that there is only one who is truly Divine: Jesus; ii) it could refer to Jesus as Lord of the church (see 1:20) and the “seven” churches of Asia in particular. At any rate it is a picture of transcendence.
- ◆ v.6 The Nicolatians were a group probably influencing some church members, possibly going back to Nicolaus of Antioch, probably legitimising sexual immorality and pagan idolatry. Virtually nothing is really known about them.
- ◆ v.7 The image of paradise may well be a deliberate foil to the large criminal sanctuary that was afforded by the precincts of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. Most such “asylums” were closed down by Roman Emperors as being places where criminality bred, but the one in Ephesus remained for long past the period in which Revelation was written. By contrast the true paradise of God will not be

like this very unsafe environment, but will be a place of true security where innocence can be untouched by predatory hands.