

# The Seven Churches: Ephesus

## Part 3

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Having studied the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 in general, we will now begin examining each of them separately. Since God's church has recently split into hundreds of different pieces, it would be futile to seek to identify each as one of the seven. Even attempting to identify the larger ones would be fruitless and create unwise comparisons among ourselves (II Corinthians 10:12). Certainly, to try to identify ourselves as "Philadelphian" rather than any other of the seven could be spiritually self-deceiving. After all, Christ addresses His seven individual instructions to the churches.

The best approach seems to be that we understand each letter from the standpoint that it might have personal instruction for us. Since we are undergoing similar spiritual circumstances, the attitudes and positions taken by each church could reflect our own. We would be wise to take the advice Christ offers. With this in mind, on to Ephesus!

1. Can taking the analysis of each church personally have a positive, encouraging effect? Revelation 2:2-3; Jude 4; Psalm 119:126; Romans 3:31.

Comment: Any saint who has sorted right from wrong doctrine, discerned good from evil leadership, and patiently continued to labor in Christ's name can identify with Ephesus! Identifying today's false apostles was not initially easy either, but many have seen how church leaders have turned true grace into lawlessness and voided God's law from their lives. If we have continued in patience and good works, we can be encouraged by Christ's initial words to Ephesus, for they apply to us in principle, if not directly.

2. The first negative comment to Ephesus can apply to many Christians today, no matter what corporate organization or "era" they identify with. Could it apply to us? Revelation 2:4; Jude 3; I John 3:18, 22; 4:18--5:3.

Comment: Can we remember our "first love" and "first works"? Have we slipped from our initial overwhelming zeal, excitement, desire, spirit of service and love for God and the brethren? Have we become somewhat jaded, cynical, critical, even bitter (Jude 8; Hebrews 12:14-16)? Have we turned selfish and accusing (Revelation 12:10)? Or have we maintained and increased our love and service to our Father, soon-coming Husband and brethren? Have our relationships become better or worse?

3. Locking ourselves into a "Philadelphian only" posture could make us overlook a very critical need. What happens to us if we fail to see this lack in ourselves? Revelation 2:5; Hebrews 2:1-3; 4:1-2; 10:19-27.

Comment: Our eternal life is at stake if we have let these things slip! Paul even reduces it to whether we care enough about our brethren and Father in heaven to meet with them on

the appointed Sabbaths. Once, we were willing to drive long distances to attend Sabbath services or annual Feasts, to sacrifice whatever was required to worship before God and fellowship with our brethren. Has anything slipped in this or other areas?

4. Do we hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans as God does? Who are the Nicolaitans? Revelation 2:6; Ephesians 1-6. Comment: To be included in these seven letters, "the deeds of the Nicolaitans" are obviously very important to be understood. Bible commentaries are very confused on the Nicolaitans. Some think the name is a Greek translation of Balaam, "destroyer of the people." Others believe they were a Gnostic sect under the umbrella of Christianity. Still others suggest that the deacon Nicolas (Acts 6:5) may have begun his own group.

Perhaps a careful study of Ephesians will shed light on their problems, how the Nicolaitans may have affected them and what we need to look for today. Some of the subjects Paul addresses are the purpose of man and the plan of God, which they may have been abandoning (1:1-23); lawlessness, exhibited in fleshly sins and doctrinally defined as false grace (2:1-10); inclusion of all peoples in salvation and basic governmental principles (2:11--3:21); church unity and the purpose of the ministry (4:1-16); putting aside sin and walking in holiness with love toward one another (4:17--5:20); family and other relationships as symbols of Christ and the church (5:20--6:9); Satan as the enemy (6:10-13); and a final plea for holiness, zeal, energy and faith through the whole armor of God--characteristics Christ rebukes them for losing in Revelation 2:4-5. A closer study of Ephesians reveals other specific sins and problems.

Paul's other writings indicate an apostasy already in progress when he wrote Ephesians. By the time John received the Revelation, that apostasy was almost complete, and Christ commends the Ephesians for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. It would seem, then, they were throwing off the effects of apostasy but needed to return to their first love and first works--restore their zeal and service. Does this not have relevance today?

Based on Paul's admonitions, the Nicolaitans, whoever they were, surely must have been turning the Ephesians from godly principles and the understanding of God's purpose to create a divine Family. They must have been leading them toward false grace and lawlessness, worldliness, sensual lust and selfishness. God hates these things and advises us to repent if we are headed that way, lest we be destroyed. He promises to give those who overcome this problem eternal life in His Kingdom.