

**PRIORITY
MAIL**

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The Seven Churches of Revelation

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PREFACE

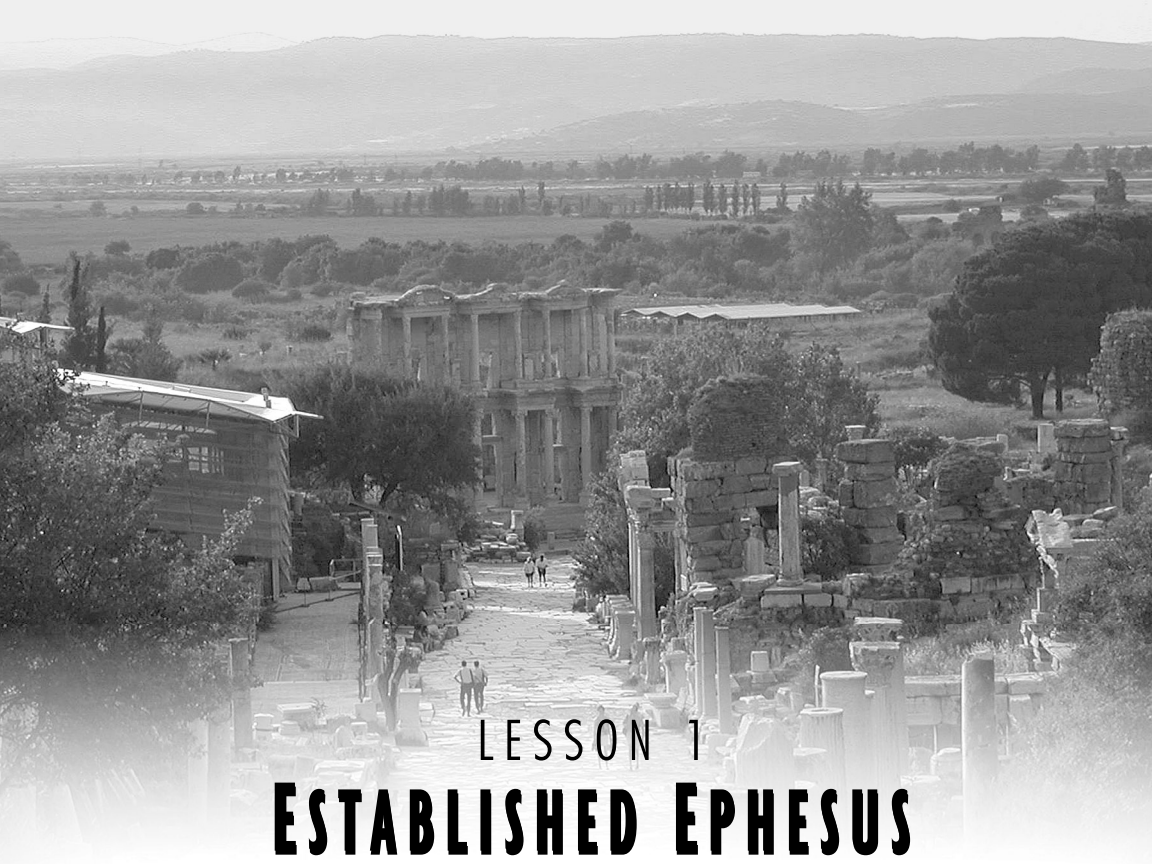
You've Got Mail

You're working along when a familiar voice on your computer says, "You've got mail." Distraction or delight? Invariably, curiosity overcomes continuation of work, and you look to find out who sent the e-mail.

Imagine a "You've got mail" from Christ. What a surprise! What would He say? Would His letter bring comfort or correction? praise or warning? I suspect it's hard for us to imagine a personal note from Christ and the impact it would have. However, it happened once to seven churches in Asia Minor, and we have the privilege of reading their priority mail.

Although some consider the Revelation of Jesus Christ to be a book that is irrelevant to our daily lives, it claims to bring blessing to those who read it (Revelation 1:3). It is a blessing not only because it looks forward to that final revealing of Christ as King of Kings (Revelation 17:14), but also because it reveals Christ in His present role as the One walking among the churches (Revelation 2; 3). But what did He say, and what is He doing?

The study of the postcard-size messages to churches in ancient Asia Minor provides more than a historic understanding of seven churches of that day. Each message reveals Christ in a unique way that matched the need of each particular church. In a typically Biblical way, the student of these passages will also find him- or herself relating the message to his or her own church. Then suddenly and almost unconsciously, it will hit home: these messages are for the reader! It's not "They got mail," but "You've got mail"!



LESSON 1

ESTABLISHED EPHEBUS

*Established churches face the danger
of drifting from their first love.*

AS I LOOKED from my balcony, the first light of morning revealed a mist hanging over the Aegean Sea. The city was Kusadasi—I pinched myself to confirm it was real. I was in Turkey, and that day I would visit Ephesus, the best-preserved ancient city of the Roman world. As many as eight thousand tourists would visit the ruins that day. To beat the rush, my wife and I found a local bus and asked the driver to let us off at Ephesus. As our bus clattered over a ridge, I saw a broad river plain, the result of years of silting by the Menderes River. As the bus approached the river, it turned inland and went eight kilometers from the coast to the entrance of ancient Ephesus.

And what a city it is! The ruins of homes, shops, theaters,

roads, and temples speak of a city that people have called the first and great metropolis of Asia. The main street winds past the ruins of great banks and a large library and ends at a colossal theater. To the left is a street that passes a great *agora*, or market, where vendors, having just come from the docks of the greatest harbor of Asia Minor, traded goods. A short walk from the main city brings the visitor to the remains of the pride of ancient Ephesus, the temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This city was “Established Ephesus.”

The reason Ephesus is the best-preserved ancient city is no mystery. Ephesus was never destroyed by earthquake, fire, or conquering army. It was simply abandoned. The question is, Why would the inhabitants abandon a thriving city?

As I contemplated this question, I looked past the market and realized there is no longer a harbor. Established Ephesus had the best of everything. Yet it was abandoned because that which was crucial to its existence had slowly filled with silt and had, therefore, made everything else in the city impossible to sustain.

A little later, while drinking a soft drink in a café, I noticed a sign pointing toward the tomb of the apostle John. I recalled that a great church had been in this great city. Established by Paul (Acts 18—20) and the recipient of a great epistle (Ephesians), the church at Ephesus was blessed. In its second generation, the church purportedly had a well-known pastor: the apostle John. Today, however, we see only the ruins of an ancient church.

Thinking of history, we can easily explain the demise of the church at Ephesus. However, we need to read the words of Christ to the church of Ephesus, found in Revelation 2:1–7.

Remember Who I Am (Revelation 2:1)

Christ initiated His message to Ephesus by reminding the believers there that He “holdeth the seven stars in his right hand” and “walketh among the golden candlesticks.” Revelation 1:20

identifies the seven stars as angels, or messengers, of seven churches. Although we can debate whether the messengers were pastors or angels, the focus is on the fact that Christ held them in His right hand.

1. What would it mean to the church at Ephesus and churches today to know that their messengers are in Christ's hand?

Established Ephesus needed to remember that its messenger depended on Christ's protection and preservation. Similarly, we know from Revelation 1:20 that the candlesticks, or lamp stands, Christ walked through were seven churches. Again the focus was not on the churches' qualities, but on the reality that Christ, although not visibly present, was walking in their midst. A church can feel alone or even abandoned, but in reality Christ is always present.

2. What could happen to churches today if they don't have a deep sense of the presence of Christ in their midst?

Remember What I Know (Revelation 2:2, 3)

3. Read Revelation 2:2 and 3. What did Christ know about the church at Ephesus?

After reminding the Ephesian believers of Who He is, Christ reminded them of what He knew, and He assured them that His knowledge was true because it was based on personal confirmation.

What Christ knew and therefore commended can be reduced to three items.

First, Christ assured the Ephesians that He knew of their service, or energy, under difficult conditions. He knew of their ability to work to exhaustion. Ephesus was a church of active, aggressive, diligent believers who pulled together. They were fulfilling the encouragement of 1 Corinthians 15:58 in that they did not “labour . . . in vain in the Lord.” They did not have an “entertain me, feed me, and I’ll watch” mindset, and they labored for the right reason, namely “for my name’s sake” (Revelation 2:3).

4. What are some right and wrong reasons a church might diligently labor for Christ?

Right reasons:

Wrong reasons:

Second, Christ commended the Ephesians for displaying godly endurance in midst of suffering. It is one thing to be known for your effort, but sometimes, continuing is tough. Christ reminded them that He knew they fulfilled the words of 1 Corinthians 15:58 in that they were “stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.” They were not quitters but, rather, persevered as those who do not grow weary in well-doing.

5. Can a church labor for a long time without doing anything commendable? Explain.

Finally, Christ commended the Ephesians for removing error. They not only did the right action by testing, exposing, and expelling false apostles; they also had the right attitude. They could not endure, or stand, evil but hated it, particularly the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

6. What excuses might a church give for not dealing with error within itself?

7. Read Revelation 2:2 and 3. If you visited an energetic church that removed error, such as the one at Ephesus, how suspicious of them would you be?

Remember What I Have against You (Revelation 2:4)

8. Read Revelation 2:4. What was the behind-the-scenes problem in the church at Ephesus?

We might expect only praise for a church like the one at Ephesus, yet Christ had something against Established Ephesus. Surprisingly, the believers there had left their first love!

What is the first love Christ spoke about? Does “first” refer to first in time, in degree, in priority? What about the love? Is it love for Christ, Christians, the lost, the Bible, or worship? As we try to grasp the unspecified object of the Ephesians’ first love, we recall that after the church at Ephesus had been established by Paul, the believers displayed love for Christ.

9. Read Acts 19. Record evidence that the Ephesians had a sincere love for Christ.

The Ephesians had fallen in love with Christ and therefore His people, His Word, and His mission, yet in the busy ministry of an established church, they had left, or let go of, that love. It had not happened instantly, but gradually; and apparently they had not realized it. It is clear that service, steadfastness, and separation are great, but they are never the key to existence.

10. How do the words of 1 Corinthians 13 reinforce the need for love?

11. Evaluate this statement: Everyone loves someone or something.

Remember What You Need to Do (Revelation 2:5)

12. Read Revelation 2:5. What did the church at Ephesus need to do?

The solution for a church that has lost its first love is found in three words: remember, repent, and return.

First, the Ephesians needed to *remember*. Like some older married couples, they had not only lost their first love, they had also forgotten what their first love had been like. Their departure had been a gradual event, and their renewal required reflecting on those first days of loving Christ.

13. Think back on your first days of loving Christ. What were you like then?

Next, established Ephesus needed to *repent*. The believers were to desire a change in their thinking. They were to abhor what had happened to them and to desire what they had once had.

14. What loves might a person need to repent of before renewing his or her love for Christ?

Lastly, they were to *return*. A genuine change of mind would mean a change of actions. They needed to do what they had once done. They were not to wait until they felt like it, but were to do it even if they did not feel like it. They needed to return to the first works associated with first love.

15. How would the prodigal son of Luke 15 be an example of remembering, repenting, and returning?

Remember What Can Happen (Revelation 2:5–7)

Like some married couples, the church at Ephesus could have become content with its lack of intimacy and said, “So what? We have learned to live without it.” To those content to live without first love, Christ promised to remove their lamp stand, meaning they would in time no longer exist as His church, spreading His light (v. 5). This is exactly what happened not only to the city of Ephesus when its harbor filled, but also to the church of Ephesus. To those who commit to returning to first love and overcoming, Christ promised fruit from the tree of life (v. 7)—a reference to the tree initially in Eden (Genesis 2:9) and ultimately seen in Heaven (Revelation 22:2), a tree associated with eternal vitality. The promises give two clear options: disaster or delight.

16. What would be evidence that you or your church is committed to maintaining first love?

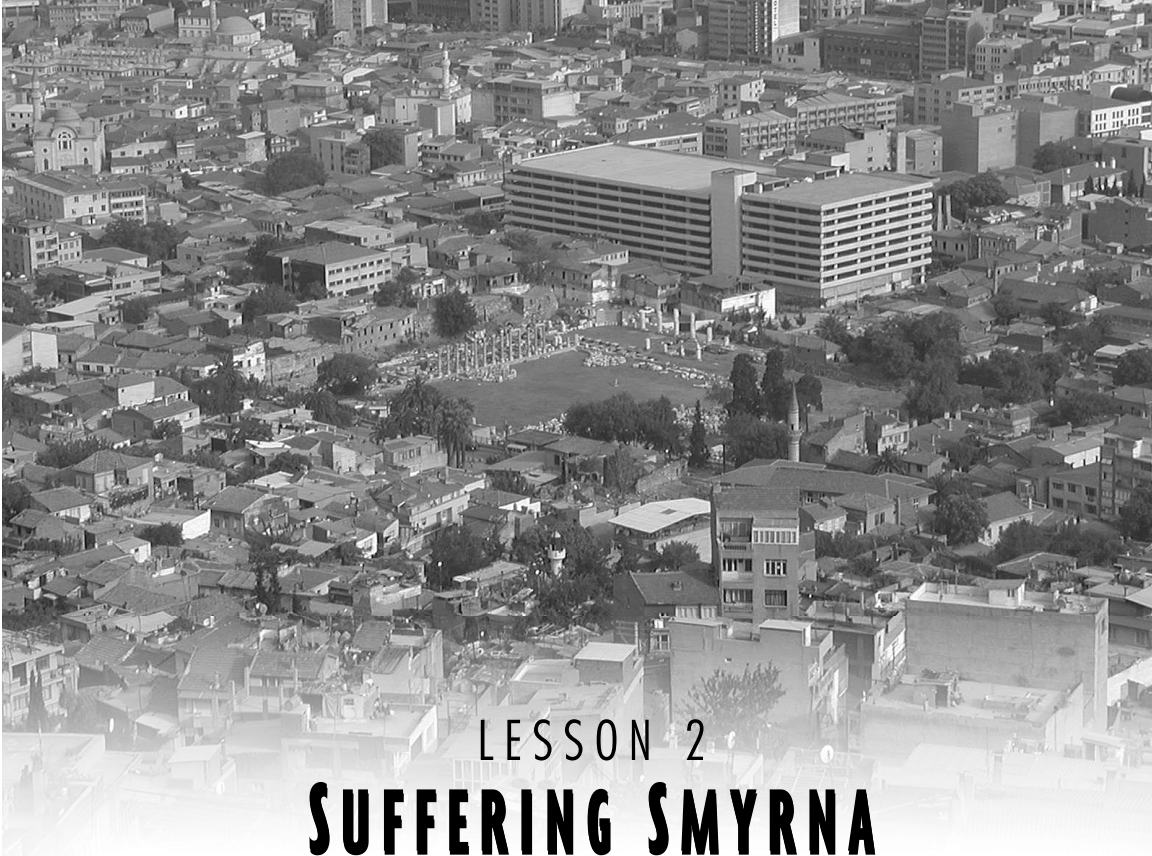
Established Ephesus reminds us that established churches and believers . . .

- can easily forget Christ's position and provision;
- can do church ministry very well yet become institutional and lack intimacy;
- can never overlook intimacy as crucial to their existence;
- must always do what is necessary to regain first love;
- can look forward to eternal vitality if they overcome.

In an active city where the thing essential to its survival—its harbor—was slowly being lost, stood an active church where the thing essential to its survival—its first love—was slowly being lost. How's your first love?

17. Reflect on the recent past. Has your love for Christ been deepening or weakening? What would you cite as evidence for your answer?

18. What must you start doing today to deepen your love for Christ?



LESSON 2

SUFFERING SMYRNA

*Suffering churches face the danger
of losing heart.*

Smyrna” is from the word “myrrh,” which was a perfume used to embalm the dead. It gave off its aroma only when it was crushed.

Located thirty-five miles northeast of Ephesus, the city of Smyrna was founded in 1000 BC by Aeolian Greeks. It had a well-planned harbor, but unlike the harbor at Ephesus, Smyrna’s harbor did not silt in. During New Testament times the city rivaled, but was inferior to, Ephesus.

Smyrna was destroyed in the seventh century BC by Asiatic Lydians. Alexander the Great planned to rebuild Smyrna as a model city of Greece. In time the city was rebuilt to new glory and was noted for its architecture, library, stadium, and medical