

## **The Epistle of Jesus Christ to the Ephesians**

The book of Revelation contains a special blessing to those who heed its message:

“Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand” (Rev. 1:3).

From these words, we find that it is important to “read”, “hear” and “keep” the things contained in the last book of the Bible. To correctly determine the significance of its symbols and figures of speech is important, but it will be to no avail if its lessons go unheeded, and unkept. We must give all due diligence in trying to understand, in order that we can then translate its principles into action in our daily living.

Our New Testament reading for the day brings our attention to the letters of Messiah to 7 ecclesias. These letters highlight certain strengths and weaknesses of the ecclesias, and provide much exhortation and encouragement to live by the instructions of the Lord. In our considerations today, we shall consider just one of those epistles, namely that written to the ecclesia at Ephesus. And in order to do so, we need firstly to look at the background of this ecclesia, as described in the book of Acts, and also Paul’s letter to the ecclesia.

### ***BACKGROUND TO THE ECCLESIA AT EPHESUS***

The record of Acts chapter 18 describes the visit of Paul to Ephesus, where he “entered the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews, before going “all over the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening the disciples”. Then a man came to Ephesus, “a certain Jew named Apollos ... an eloquent man, and mighty in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24). Although he was instructed “in the way of the Lord”, there was a deficiency in his understanding, and so Aquila and Priscilla “took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (Acts 18:26). He then became a powerful exponent of the Gospel message, as he “mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, shewing by the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 18:28).

Acts chapter 19 proceeds to recount the Apostle’s return to Ephesus, where he found others who needed further instruction in Divine things, and he baptised them into the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5). Then “he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God” (vs. 8). He continued there for two years (vs. 10), “so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (vs. 10). And “so mightily grew the word of God and prevailed” (vs. 20). But the Apostle’s labours were not without opposition: Demetrius, a silversmith who made idols of Diana, the principal Ephesian goddess, realised that he would lose business as a consequence of the city turning away from idolatry, to trust in the Name of Jesus Christ (vs. 27). He raised up a voice of opposition, the consequence being that “the whole city was filled with confusion”, and an uproar against Paul ensued. In the affray, “when the townclerk had appeased the people, he said: Ye men of Ephesus, what man is there that knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana, and of the

image that fell down from Jupiter?” (vs. 35), and with such words “he dismissed the assembly”, and the crowd dispersed.

Acts chapter 20 describes a further visit to Ephesus by Paul, where he warned them of future dangers: “... I know this, that after my parting shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them ...” (Acts 20:see verses 29-31). Notice that here, threats to Ecclesial harmony would come both from external wolves and internal dissenters, and this was something the brethren had to prepare for.

When we come to consider Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, we find a number of related themes. Chapter 2 describes how that whilst Demetrius fashioned idols of Diana’s image, the believers are created by God: “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Eph. 2:10). And a main theme of the Epistle, is the various applications of the principles of Love. Chapter 2 again speaks of “God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us” (vs. 4). Consider also the following verses:

“... to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God ...” (3:19).

“... that ye, being rooted and grounded in love ...” (3:17)

“... speaking the truth in love ...” (4:15)

“... and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us ...” (5:2)

Two other themes of the letter are the exalted position of the believers, where Jesus “hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:6), and the need to be children of Light, contending against the works of darkness: “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (5:11).

These principles are brought together in Messiah’s letter to the Ephesians, as recorded by John in Revelation chapter 2.

### ***THE LETTER OF JESUS CHRIST TO THE EPHESIANS***

The Epistle begins by approving the Ecclesia for their contending for the faith:

“I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars ...” (Rev. 2:2).

They evidently had heeded the warnings of Paul regarding the inroads of Apostasy, and were diligent in rejecting the evil, being unable to “bear” them. The word “apostle” literally means “one sent”: there were those who claimed to be sent by God, who in fact, were like

the false prophets of old (cp. Eze. 13:6). They were not naively accepted at face value, the ecclesia at Ephesus put them to the proof: they “tried” them and found them wanting. They were “liars”, wolves in sheep’s clothing who sought to destroy and wreak havoc amongst the flock of God.

The Ecclesia did these deeds with good intentions:

“... and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted ...” (vs 3).

They engaged their labours in the Master’s service, for his “name’s sake”. They patiently endured tribulation, and did not faint in adversity, having the strength of character (cp. Prov. 24:10) to overcome difficulties for Christ’s sake. Oh that there were more men and women like this in our age! Who earnestly contend for the faith, who uncloak the errorists, proving them to be the liars that they are! But there is always a remnant, a few who hold fast to the Truth in a day of evil.

However, the ecclesia at Ephesus also had serious problems:

“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love ...” (vs 4).

They had left their “first love”. That is, the love they had at the first – the quality referred to 14 times in Paul’s Epistle to them. Evidently, they tried false apostles more out of hatred for the error, than love for the Truth. They began with a zealous loving spirit, as evidenced in the record of Acts, but as time went on in the Apostle’s absence, their love waxed cold, like those referred to by the Lord (Mat. 24:12).

Solomon describes how that there is “a time to love, and a time to hate” (Eccl. 3:8). Both features are necessary: we must be like Messiah, in refusing the evil, and choosing the good (cp. Isa. 7:16) The admonition was accordingly given:

“Remember therefore from whence **thou art fallen**, and repent, and do the first works: or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy lampstand out of his place, except thou repent” (vs 5).

We noted earlier that one of the themes of Paul’s Epistle is how the believers occupied a very high status in the Divine Estimation – in the heavenlies. But in certain regards, the ecclesia had fallen. Like the image that fell down from Jupiter (probably a meteorite), that their fellow countrymen revered, they had fallen down due to their lack of love.

Perhaps this is alluded to in verse 6:

“But this thou hast that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate” (vs 6).

Their problem was not a hatred of errant behaviour – they shared this with the Lord - but it was rather a lack of a loving motivation to promote the Truth in all its positive aspects. Notice, that it was the “deeds” of the Nicolaitanes that were to be hated. Very often, false doctrine goes hand in hand with bad morals and questionable practices. To be faithful in both is essential: “let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” (1 Jno. 3:18).

### ***AN ENCOURAGING PROMISE***

The deficiencies at Ephesus were serious: if not remedied, they would result in the ecclesial lampstand being removed. But the Lord concludes this Epistle by giving encouragement by providing a vision of the future:

“... To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

The word for “overcometh” implies a conquering aspect to the believer’s warfare of faith, and brings us back to Messiah’s commendation at the beginning of his Epistle, that they earnestly contended for the faith. So Paul writes to the same ecclesia: “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places ...” (Eph. 6:12). The only weapon Messiah’s brethren possess is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17), and this is “mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds” of Sin (2 Cor. 10:4). The Lord Jesus Christ overcame (Jno. 16:33), and so will his brothers: being being lovers of the Truth, they wage a valiant fight against the adversaries which abound.

The promise is to be allowed “to eat of the Tree of Life”. In the Apocalypse, the Tree of Life is used to represent the reward given to the faithful: “to him that overcometh.” Here, being permitted to eat of the Tree of Life represents the gift to those who have endured a period of trial. This clearly contrasts with the expulsion from the Edenic paradise of those who failed to “overcome”, preventing them from partaking of the life-giving Tree.

The presence of the Tree of Life in the Garden taught Adam and his wife that if they were faithful, their faithfulness would be rewarded. But even in the event of their transgression, there would be a Way of Life provided – on God’s terms. The expulsion of Adam and his wife from the Garden taught that the way of life can only be accessed by the means of God’s appointing. Thus, the tree stands as a powerful exhortation to us, not to devise fables which contradict the main thrust of Scripture, not to walk along the broad way that leads to destruction, but rather to understand and accept the way of Salvation, as appointed by the Lord Himself. We must seek wisdom, and then walk in its ways, which are the ways to the Tree of Life. And then, if we show ourselves to be faithful, if we “keep” God’s ways, if we seek to “overcome” sin, then by God’s grace, when the Lord returns, we might partake of the Antitypical Tree and so be “partakers of the divine nature” even as the Lord has promised (2 Pet 1:4).

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