

BHBC Life Group notes

“Dear Church” Seven letters from Jesus in Revelation

Part 1: First Love

14 October 2018

What words or phrases best describe an average person’s perception of the Book of Revelation? What has been your perception of Revelation? What contributed, positively or negatively, to your perspective?

The Setting

It’s approximately 95 AD - 60 years after Jesus died and 30 years after the events in Acts and persecution against Jesus’ followers is heating up. John, the last living apostle, is exiled from the Roman Empire to a remote island, called Patmos, because of his influence in the Jesus movement. While John sits alone in exile, Jesus appears to him in all his glory and tells John to record what he sees.

The Seven Letters

Jesus sends letters to churches under John’s care in Asia Minor to commend, rebuke and encourage them as they await his return. Jesus wants his people to be a source of light in the world (Matthew 5:14-16, Ephesians 2:10). These letters tell them how they are doing.

Genre

Revelation is unique in the New Testament. Scholars refer to it as an “apocalyptic literature,” which simply means it uses symbols, visions, and supernatural imagery to communicate its message (similar to Daniel and Ezekiel in the Old Testament).

Read: Revelation 1:1-3

Within the three opening sentences of Revelation, two words are used by the author himself to describe the book he is writing. The first word is “apocalypse” and the second word is “prophecy”.

In the seven letters (Revelation 2 and 3) our Lord Jesus Christ pays a pastoral visit to seven different first-century local churches. In each case he tailors a message fitting to that congregation in that place at that moment in history.

These were real churches filled with real people struggling with real problems. Though 2000 years separate us from them, their issues are not much different from ours. As we go through these seven letters, we will see ourselves and our churches in a new light.

The first letter is written to the church in Ephesus. The city is a well-known city in the province of Asia. The trade route from the Euphrates civilisations terminated at Ephesus. It was a beautiful city, with great temples, the most notable being the temple of Artemis which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Another grand monument in the city was the famous 45000 seater amphitheatre. The city was also known for Greek-Roman mystery cult religions, and in fact, “Ephesus charms” were sold widely as ensures of good luck.

Q. Why is this background information so important to our understanding of the church in Ephesus? How would you describe the culture in which they lived and served? What is something new you've learned about the book of Revelation and Ephesus either from the sermon or the introduction?

The Ephesians lived in a hostile culture. The church was small and marginalised. They also had a reputation of causing problems (see Acts 19). Yet, in this incredibly dark place, the gospel was able to take hold and transform not just individual hearts, but an entire culture.

Read: Revelation 2:1-7

Q. What are your initial impressions of this church? What have they done right? What is lacking? What will be the outcome if they continue this pattern?

Q, What exactly does it mean to loose your first love for Jesus?

The church has done many things well. They are a church that works hard for the spread of the gospel. They test all their leaders, exposing false leaders and pushing them away. They are an enduring church, who have not stopped enduring for Jesus. What they lack, however, is their first love for Jesus.

Q. The sermon related “first love” and “first works”. What does this mean about the “works” we should be doing for the Lord?

Christ

In each letter, Christ is uniquely described. In this letter, Jesus is described as holding the 7 stars and walking among the 7 lampstands. As stated in Revelation 1, the 7 stars are angels for each church and the lampstands are the churches. Jesus is declaring his authority and oversight of these churches. He's also expressing his deep care for them. The book of Ephesians is a letter written from Paul to the church in Ephesus 30 years prior to Revelation. In short, the letter of Ephesians beautifully describes all that Jesus has done for them (chapters 1-3) and how they should respond to Jesus' love and sacrifice (chapters 4-6).

Ephesians 2:1-10.

Q: What had Christ done for them? How had they changed because of Jesus? What were they to become as a result? What happens when we forget or lose sight of these critical truths?

Church

Thirty years later, John draws the Ephesians back to their past. He tells them that they have “forsaken their first love.” He then asks them to remember how far they have fallen.

Q: What do you think happened for them to lose or forsake the love they had decades before?

Q. Jesus gave them a prescription in Revelation 2:5 to repent and return to first works. What does this tell us?

When we get comfortable with our relationship with God and take it for granted and go on living our lives like we are at its centre, we are in danger of losing our first love.

Q. Based on Revelation 2:1-7, what is the warning for churches like BHBC? Is our lampstand in BHBC permanent? Why or why not? Describe how a church can do good things, but be loveless or heartless. How may a church guard against this?

Our lampstand can be snuffed out. Many churches believe the right things and do the right things, but they no longer do them for Jesus, and simply stop at an intellectual level. Jesus is calling us into a wholeheartedly love affair with Him. The lampstand represents the approval of God on the church itself. No church has an unlimited claim on God's blessings. Any church may have its "lampstand" removed by the Lord.

The Church is not a building; it's a community of people. In the case of Ephesus, it's not only the church that lost their love, but its people. Over time, PEOPLE can drift in their passion for Christ and in their pursuit of loving people. Drifting happens to most Christ followers at some point in their spiritual walk.

Q: Has there been a time when you may have forsaken your first love for Christ and his people? What contributed to losing your passion for God and people? Do any of these resonate with you?

1. I grew bored. I lost interest in following God and serving the church.
2. I was wounded. Someone hurt me in the past and I'm leery of it happening again.
3. I became distracted by something else. My schedule is full of good things, but I don't make time to pursue the best things: loving God and serving people.

Revelation 2:7 NIV

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

Q. And so we come to the ultimate question. Are we listening to what God is saying? I believe that through the Scripture text, God is calling us to come back to our "first love" and the serve God and the church as "first works".

Important: At BHBC we are passionate about serving. There are many ways in which you can serve at BHBC. Why not discuss at your group ways in which you could get involved in serving at BHBC is a way that reflects your "first love".

Q. What is the promise (Revelation 2:7) to the victorious and why do you think it is so significant in its context?