

02-08-04b Revelation

The uproar in the city of Ephesus takes place, we know that Paul was martyred in the early 60's or even mid 60's A.D. and this is some time earlier than that, so we'll just put it in the 50's, it's hard to assign an actual date, but we know that John communicates the vision from Jesus circa A.D. 96 or so, so this would have been within living memory, but some decades later. Let's say that this is 40 to 50 years after the fact, well what's 40 to 50 years in our past? The 1950's and 1960's and many of us can remember things from the 50's and from the 60's that took place. I remember the Watts Riots that took place in the 60's in Los Angeles.

There are people who remember a lot of riotous behavior and why it took place and how it took place, Martin Luther King and the marches in the South and all of that. So this was within living memory, but things had progressed from that point and in many cases perhaps even gotten worse. Well the next place where we find a mention of Ephesus and Paul's interaction with him is in Acts chapter 20 verse 17 and following.

So if you move down a page or so to Acts chapter 17 we find Paul from Miletus sending to Ephesus and calling for the elders of the church. He doesn't go back to Ephesus, but he's nearby and he has the elders travel to him. When they had come to him he said you know from the first day that I came to Asia in what manner I lived among you serving the Lord with all humility with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews how I kept back nothing that was helpful but proclaimed it to you and taught you publicly and from house to house.

He assembled at the school of Tyrannus, he assembled at the synagogue and he also visited homes and had many classes, Bible classes. He would make little short trips out from Ephesus and go to the surrounding towns and have little Bible conferences for those two years that he spent in Ephesus. Testifying to Jews and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the theme of his message. This was summarized earlier as talking about the kingdom of God. So we have here a very helpful elaboration on what Paul taught when he taught the kingdom of God.

It was change of mind. This is the theme that John the Baptist taught wasn't it? Change your minds, bear fruit in keeping with change of mind. The Lord Jesus Christ said repent, the kingdom is at hand.

John said repent, the kingdom is at hand. And Paul the Apostle continues that same theme. Change your mind because the kingdom is near, the kingdom is available, kingdom blessings are seizable, obtainable, possessible by you.

They are possessed by change of mind, they are possessed by faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. He went on in verse 22 to say, See, now I go bound in the Spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me. That is an interesting subject in itself.

None of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. It is God's grace that is available in these kingdom blessings that are obtainable through faith and through change of mind. Indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more.

Therefore I testify to you this day, I am innocent of the blood of all men. Now keep in mind here, he has been testifying about the kingdom, he has been testifying about change of mind and about the exercise of faith. And he says, because I have done this, I am innocent of your blood.

What is he talking about? This is the blood of the sin unto death. This is God's discipline on believers who fail to turn, who fail to heed, who fail to respond. This is not blood of unbelievers who did not listen to the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ for salvation from the lake of fire.

He says, I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all. And you will notice men is in italics there in your New King James. He says, all of you, all of those to whom I taught, all of those who came with me from the synagogue and met at the school of Tyrannus, all of those who came to my Bible classes over those two years.

You could stretch this to say that he preached the gospel to those who were unsaved and they came to faith, but the emphasis of Paul's ministry was teaching to Jews, teaching to Gentiles the kingdom, the blessings, the opportunities to do as he has done and finish their race with joy. He says, I have not shunned to declare to you, and notice this is by way of explanation. He says, I am innocent of the blood of all because I have not shunned to declare to you elders the whole counsel of God.

It is the declaration of the whole counsel of God, not just the gospel of salvation, but the whole counsel of God that makes Paul innocent of their blood. This is important because if you go to some denominational churches, you will find this blood on the hands going back to Jeremiah and the watchman on the wall. If you fail to declare and people go to hell because you did not give them the gospel, their blood is on your hands.

They will come to this passage and appeal to it and say, you have to go tell the gospel to every unbeliever you know or their blood will be on your hands. That is not what this means. Just look at it.

He says, I am innocent of the blood of all because I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Nothing deterred me, nothing stopped me from teaching everything of all of the mysteries of the truth of Jesus Christ and of the church that he has been made steward of. Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.

He says, you need to do the same thing I have done. You are stewards of the mysteries of Christ and you need to do the same thing I have done. You see the interplay here with blood.

He says Christ purchased this church with his blood. You need to make sure that you are not guilty of blood by failing to declare the whole counsel of God. Teach you see what he told Timothy.

Preach the word in season, out of season, exhort, rebuke, instruct in all righteousness. Don't let anyone despise your youth. Don't let anyone slow you down.

Don't let anyone turn you aside and get you distracted by endless disputes and talking about words and genealogies and all of this. Declare the whole counsel of God so that you like me can be innocent of the blood of all. If someone winds up out of the will of God, off the narrow way that goes through the straight gate, their blood is on their own head.

Whatever they suffer from God's discipline is on their own head and that is represented by blood. It doesn't mean that they are not saved or they have lost their salvation. Well this is a fascinating study of the city of Ephesus.

We are going to pause here and take our break. But if there is one thing we get from this first lesson, it is that the word of God that comes to us meets us where we are. It communicates to us where we live.

Paul dwelt with the Ephesians for two years. He moved them out of the place of conflict to a place where he could teach them and declare to them the whole counsel of God. He tells the elders, nobody can say that I didn't present to you all of the counsel of God.

This same church is going to get a warning from the Lord Jesus Christ himself that they have fallen away from what they first learned and what they first came to understand under that ministry. Not only from Paul but also from John. What a privileged church to have had the ministry of two apostles declaring to them the whole counsel of God.

The apostles can say, I fulfilled my calling, I did my shepherding, I declared to you the counsel of God. If you fail to take advantage of it, your blood is on your own head and on your own hands because it isn't for lack of opportunity. We cannot stand at the judgment seat of Christ and say, Lord, you know, there just wasn't a good church in my area.

There just wasn't the opportunity. You didn't really give me a good place to get fed. God makes provision to us.

The word is not far off. We don't have to go up to heaven to find Christ. We don't have to descend to Sheol to find Christ.

It is near. It is in our hearts. It is on our lips.

And we are accountable. There is nothing worse. We sang the hymn that we had to skip a verse or two of this morning.

I love the hymn. I love the first and last verses and I love the tune. I have loved it ever since I was a tiny child.

I know whom I have believed and I am persuaded. But when you look at the verses, he says, I know not how the Holy Spirit comes and creates faith. I know not why God came and imparted faith to me so that I would be saved.

And it is wrong. The Calvinist view, the reformed view says we are not responsible. God is going to come and create the faith.

God is going to come and use the Holy Spirit to create faith. And the writer of the hymn says, I just don't know the mystery of why God in his sovereign predestination chose to create faith in me. But I know whom I have believed.

Well, there are many things that we don't know and don't understand. We can't fathom the depths of God's grace. But there is one thing we do understand from the first to the last page of God's revealed word.

And that is we are accountable for what God presents to us. We are responsible for what we do with the word that comes to us. We are without excuse.

Because God has sent his apostles and from the apostles comes the inspired word of the New Testament. And that New Testament truth is handed to pastors, the angels, the messengers of the churches who hopefully are faithful communicators of that message just as Paul did. And he says, I did not shun to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

What do we do with that counsel? What do we do in the days, the hours, the minutes of our life? Day by day by day with what God has declared to us. Are we like those in James who look into the glass of the word of God and see ourselves and then straight away walk away and forget what we saw? Or do we constantly, you know people check their appearance. Did you ever notice in a building next to the elevator, sometimes in the elevator there will be a mirror? How many different buildings have you been in where next to the elevator there is a mirror? Next to the entrance or the exit there will be a mirror.

Why? For people to check their appearance before they go in for a meeting. To check their appearance before they leave to go meet with business associates. We have mirrors, hopefully, I have a mirror here in the entryway.

What's it for? You check yourself before you go out. Why? Several times a day we look in the mirror. You take a restroom break and there is always a mirror in there to check and see how you look.

Well, do we do that in our spiritual life? Do we use the word of God and we look into that glass and see our reflection and check to see if we are in the faith. Check to see if the thoughts and intents of our heart are what they should be. Do we check that spiritual mirror as often as we check the physical mirror during the day? We should and perhaps more often.

It has been declared to us. That looking glass has been put in our hands. All we have to do is check it and not forget what we see.

That's our responsibility before the Lord and we are going to see that the Ephesian church forgot that. As much as they had been given, as much apostolic ministry as had been imparted to them, they forgot it. Let's pause here and take our break.

I am way over time, but we will take a break and when we come back we are going to see how this background gives us a very great insight into what Jesus says to the church in Ephesus and particular insight into the reward that is promised to those who overcome. A reward that is available to you and to me as well. What level of importance should an overseer, what level of importance should an elder, what level of importance should a pastor assign to his responsibility for the flock of God? Well, it is the blood-bought church.

How precious is the blood of Christ? How valuable is the work of Christ on the cross? That's the priority that should be assigned to this. It's not haphazard. It's not indifferent.

It's not come see, come saw. It's not one of many plates spinning on sticks. Shepherd the flock of God is top priority.

It is as precious as the blood of Christ itself. It is a delegated responsibility. It is a delegated authority from the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Why is Paul so intent on impressing this on the minds of the Ephesian elders? And this is very important, because Paul is now going to talk about what's going to happen in the future in Ephesus. And the future is the present in the time of John. Verse 29, For I know, says Paul, I know this, that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

What do wolves do to the flock? They devour them. They destroy them. They are no longer feeding and producing the produce for which a flock is raised.

Why do you raise a flock of sheep? Why do you shepherd sheep? They produce wool. They produce milk. Used milk was a common substance that was used in the ancient world.

And meat, for various reasons. They needed to be slaughtered for food. Mutton and lamb was also meat.

They were also sacrificial animals. And many of them were used for sacrifice in the church. And their sacrifice reflected the glory of God through the Levitical system in the Old Testament.

But savage wolves come in and destroy all of those potentials and all of those functions. The wolves come in. And why do they come in? Because the wolves are only interested in one thing, and that's their own satisfaction, their own gratification.

Wolves will often kill and destroy and not even finish the meal. They just come in and kill it for the sport. Also, in addition to the wolves who will come in and not spare the flock, who will devour them for selfish reasons, from among yourselves, men will rise up speaking perverse things.

Apostasy and heresy and distortion and twisting of the truth that Paul has so carefully inculcated over all of these months and travels. They're going to come up and they're going to pervert. They're not going to introduce entirely new things.

They're going to take existing things and twist them. And twisted truth is much harder to identify and eliminate than an outright falsehood that has no element of truth in it. And so this is why Reformed theology has taken such a hold.

Much of it is true and biblically sound and you can document it, but then there are portions that are twisted and you twist just enough of it and your wonderful building on its wonderful foundation with its straight corners and its plum and true gets tipped like the leaning tower of Pisa and the higher you build, the more in danger it is of falling over. Perverse things. To draw away the disciples after themselves.

What's the function of the shepherd? To lead people to Christ. What's the function of the overseer of the flock of God? To tend them on the true owner's behalf, not to steal them to himself. And one of the characteristics of false leaders in the church is that they develop a personality cult.

They develop a loyalty and a following that is dependent on them rather than on the Lord and on the word of God. Drawing away disciples after themselves. Therefore, watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace which is able to build you up and do what? The word of God's grace is able to give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. The inheritance is potential. The word is able to give you that.

It is not going to give it to you unless you persevere, unless you not only hear it but meditate on it, unless you look into the looking glass and remember what you see, unless you sustain faith and hope and love over time. It's called endurance. You have need of faith.

You have need of patience. You have need of endurance, Peter says, so that after you have suffered a while, you will inherit. I commend you to God and to the word of His grace.

That's where the power comes from which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. And this is one of the marks of these wolves and the false teachers who are going to come in and lead away the flock is that they do covet silver.

They do covet gold. They do covet apparel. You yourselves know that these hands here have provided for my necessities.

He's holding out his own hands, I'm sure, as he's talking to the Ephesian elders. He says, you see these gnarled, wrinkled and scarred hands? He says, these hands have provided for my necessities and for those who are with me. I have shown you in every way by laboring like this that you must support the weak.

And remember the words of the Lord Jesus that He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive. Fascinating quote because it's not in any of the Gospels. You can't find a reference to that in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

No place in the canonical Gospels do you have a verse where Jesus says this. But Paul delivers this additional word from the Lord. When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

Then they all wept freely and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship. And it was indeed the case that they never did lay eyes on him again in this life.

This is background. This is the Ephesian church a few decades before the time of John. This is Paul's prediction.

After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among yourselves will rise up men who speak perverse things, drawing away disciples after themselves. They become followers of men instead of followers of God.

Well, Paul sent Timothy. If you go to 1 Timothy 1 and verse 3, we need to turn there and see this because this is one of the last ministries that Paul exercises on behalf of the Ephesian church. 1 Timothy 1 and verse 3. Paul is writing to Timothy and he says, As I urged you when I went into Macedonia.

Remember, Paul left Timothy there when he went on to Macedonia. Remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine. Reminds you of what he told them in Acts, doesn't it? He was concerned about people within the church rising up and leading people astray with false teaching.

Remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor to give heed to fables and endless genealogies which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in the faith. Now, the purpose of the commandment is love. The purpose of what commandment? It's the charge.

The reason I'm leaving you, Timothy, in Ephesus, the reason I want you to remain in Ephesus, and squelch these false teachers, and encourage people not to be led astray by fables and teachings that are not out of the Scripture that lead to disputes, is what the church needs is godly edification which is in the faith. And the purpose of all of this is love. That love that is to characterize the church has a source.

It is from a pure heart. It is from a good conscience. It is from a sincere faith.

From which, he says in verse 6, some, having strayed, have turned aside into what? Idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law. What law? The law of Moses. These are the Judaizers coming back in saying, not only do we think the Old Testament is good, we think that's the word of God.

This new stuff that Paul and these others have brought in is causing you to stray from the faith of the fathers. Who says we're not supposed to worship on the Sabbath? Who says we're not supposed to continue to offer the sacrifices? Just because Jerusalem has fallen doesn't mean that the law of Moses is abrogated. Just because Christ came doesn't mean that we shouldn't be good Jews first.

You Greeks need to be circumcised. You need to come in and follow the teachings that we have accreted onto the law of Moses. Some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

There is a wonderful constructive purpose in teaching from the law of Moses. Paul did this. He had all of the training from the Pharisees.

When he talked to the Jews, he could draw on all of that great Old Testament truth. But he says these people don't even understand the law of Moses. They don't see how it foreshadows Christ.

They don't show the fulfillment in Christ and the progress of God's unfolding revelation and His plan in dispensations and in the church. We know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, if you use the law for its proper purpose. And what is the law? Paul says over in Romans, it's a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.

If people try to use the law in the church for something other than teaching about Christ, they're not using it lawfully. Knowing this, and he goes on to talk about, the different sins that can be committed in various categories. And he says in verse 10, if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust.

And he goes on to talk about his ministry. But you can see that he left Timothy in Ephesus because he knew that heresy would come in, that Judaizers would come in, that these profane genealogies and endless idle talk would distract people and lead them astray. And he said, you've got to have love that comes from a pure heart and a sincere faith and a good conscience.

That's the purpose of the commandment. This is a good measure of ourselves. We can look over the past day.

Think about the last 24 hours. Have we exercised love out of a pure heart? What is a pure heart? Well, what is an impure heart? If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. Have I had jealousy? Have I had bitterness? Have I been worried? Have I been insecure? Have I gone on and on and on about the details of life or people and personalities and issues? People get concerned about the national news.

They watch the news and get all wrapped around the axle. What is a pure heart? What is a good conscience? A good conscience means that you hold the standard of the Word of God against yourself and where you fail, you confess. Where you succeed, you say, well, good, I hope I can continue to do that, and then you move on.

A sincere faith, a genuine faith, a faith that is grounded in the Word of God, that knows the Word of God and keeps it. Jesus said, he that has my word and keeps it, he's the one that loves me. He's the one that I and my Father are going to come to and make our home with, over in John 14, 23.

So, the law is good if one uses it lawfully. Don't let it get twisted. Don't let people distort the scriptures and wind up in idle talk and leading you astray.

This would be a problem in Ephesus. Well, now let's go back to Revelation chapter 2. To the messenger, to the pastor of the church of Ephesus write, These things say he who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. By the way, the seven stars, you know what the first thing is that somebody in Ephesus would think of when they hear that phrase? You say, the seven stars, and Jesus has been pictured by John as holding these seven stars, and he's revealed the mystery of them.

But, what would someone think of when they hear seven stars? Well, in ancient cosmology, when they looked up in the night sky, when they looked up in the sky in the day and the night actually, there was this carpet of stars that were all fixed. As the earth turned, this pattern of stars would move across the sky, but they were all fixed in relation to one another. But there were seven heavenly objects that did not conform with that pattern.

They wandered against that background. They moved on some other plan. There were seven.

And these were called planetes in Greek. Planetes means wanderers. There were seven wandering bodies in the heavens.

They were the five visible planets, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Those are the five planets that you can see with the naked eye. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

And the sun and the moon. And they were all called planetes. They were all planets.

The sun was called a planet in the ancient world. The moon was called a planet. And these seven lights in the sky were unique, and they were studied, and they were talked about.

We know from Genesis that God put the lights in the sky for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years. They were guidance for mankind. And even in the secular ancient world, men guided their behavior by observing the stars.

There was another group of seven stars, genuine stars, that were significant in the ancient world, and these were the Pleiades, or the seven sisters. I remember when I was a child, they took us on a field trip to Mount Palomar, out in Southern California. And that's the first time I distinctly remember.

They pointed out in the planetarium where you turn out all the lights and shine the little dots on the ceiling. And they said, now you see this little group right here? If you look really closely, you can count those dots, and there's seven of them. Those are the seven sisters.

Those are the Pleiades. And the appearance of the Pleiades in the spring signaled the time to plant. And the disappearance of the Pleiades in the fall signaled the time to harvest.

The Pleiades were the sign of when to plant and when to harvest in the ancient world. So they were a sign for guidance on how to operate on this earth. So you have the seven planets, and these seven stars, or seven planets, it comes down to us in the seven days of the week.

The ancient Babylonians, way back in the dim recesses of time, organized time. They're the ones who came up with the seven-day week, the ancient Babylonians. And they had four seven-day weeks in a month.

They came up with the lunar cycle for measuring time. And they named each of those days after their gods, which they assigned a different god to each of the visible planets. And this has come down through the Greeks and the Romans in Latin, and ultimately through the Germanic peoples down to us today.

What's our first day of the week? Sun day. What's our second day of the week? Moon day. Sun day, moon day.

And if you went back to the ancient Greeks, their Sunday was Hemera Heliu. Heliu is the word for sun. Monday was Hemera Selenes, day of the moon.

Tuesday was Hemera Arias, which is one of the Greek gods, Aries. Wednesday was Hemera Hermes. Thursday was Hemera Dios, or Zeus, for Zeus.

Friday was Hemera Aphrodite. And Saturday was Hemera Cronum. So you had the gods Aries, Hermes, Zeus, Aphrodite, and Cronos.

Cronos, the god of time. Those were the ancient Greek names. About a hundred years before Christ, the Romans redid their stuff, and they started using the seven-day week.

They named the five planets after their own gods. Mars, Mercury, Jove, which is Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. So their days, Sunday was Dios Solis.

We talk about solar things related to the sun. Monday was Dios Lunae. Claire de Lune is the lunar cycle.

It refers to the moon. They thought crazy people were moonstruck. Tuesday was Dios Martis, for the god Mars.

Wednesday was Dios Mercuri, for Mercury. Thursday was Dios Jovis, for Jove, or Jupiter, who was their equivalent of Zeus. Friday was Dios Veneris, for Venus.

And Saturday was Dios Saturni, which has come down into our world. Why do we call it Saturn Day on Saturday? It's the planet Saturn. But of course, our Monday through Friday have changed.

But you think about it in Spanish. What are the days of the week? In Spain, the week starts on Monday. So it's Lunes, the moon, Martes, Mars, Miercoles, for Wednesday, which is Mercury, Jueves, which is Jove, Viernes, which is Venus, and then they changed to Sabado, which goes back to the Jewish Sabbath, and then Domingo, for Sunday.

But coming down into English, how did we get our days? Well, you come down through the Germanic peoples, and they renamed some of the days according to their gods. And you remember in the operas, the Wagner Ring operas and all that, you've got Woden and Thor and Freya and all of these Germanic gods. So we still have Sun Day and Moon Day.

And then for Tuesday, instead of having Mars, we have the Germanic equivalent, who was Tiu, was the Germanic god of war. For Wednesday, for Mercury, they had Woden. So we have Woden's Day or Wednesday.

That's why it's spelled so funny, Wednesday, it's Woden's Day. And Thursday is Thor's Day, the day for Thor. And then Freya, F-R-E-Y-A, Freya is our Friday.

Well, I'm running off onto a second tape, but I'm bound to determine I'm going to finish this, so please bear with me. We're making progress. These seven stars that are spoken of here have a double reference, because you have the seven-branched golden candlestick and the seven stars, both mentioned together by the Lord Jesus, both pictured with him.

He's walking among them. And what does this say? This is a direct confrontation with the mythology of the day. He's talking to people in the city of Artemis, of the Ephesians.

All of the magic that was practiced there, the superstition and this great industry that caused the riot when Paul was in Ephesus in his early days, touted these deities and the astrology. Archaeology has dug up all kinds of astrological paraphernalia in this region and in the province of Asia and in Ephesus in particular. This was the popular notion that if you could appease the various gods, Saturn, for example, was the god of old age.

They talk about someone with a Saturnine. Saturn was the slowest moving planet in the heavens. Of all of the seven planetes, Saturn was the slowest moving, and so it was associated with old age.

And these various associations, you had Mercury, which was the fastest moving that they could see, and that became Mercury, the winged messenger. He is fleet of foot and he moves very rapidly, and so if you wanted things to move quickly, why would you try to appease Mercury? Venus was the bringer of peace, and so if you had strife or you were threatened by war, why would you burn stuff to Venus and try to get her on your good side? If you needed to conquer somebody, you would go to Mars. He is the god of war.

Jupiter was the god of jollity, of gaiety, of joy. And of course you had the Sun and the Moon governing the cycles of seasons and that agricultural economy and so forth. So all of these were put forward to people, and this was the common culture, the common understanding.

So when John says, this is what I saw when I looked at the Lord Jesus, he held the seven stars in his right hand. Whatever authority you think the planets might have, whatever authority you think the Pleiades might have, whatever authority you think these magicians might be touting, you just remember the Lord Jesus holds those stars in his right hand, and he says that the stars are something completely different. The authority you should be looking to is the authority of the word of God in the mouth of God's messenger.

The stars are the angels of the seven churches. Where do you look for your guidance? Where do you look for your source of strength? Where do you look for your security? Where do you look for your strength? You look to the stars, and those stars communicate light to you that comes from God. That's the message.

It is in contradistinction to the common culture, and we find that today, do we not? The word of God gives us an alternate view of life, an alternate view of the universe, an alternate view of where peace and prosperity and security and strength and profit, long-term something you hold in your hand when you leave, like Solomon talked about in Ecclesiastes, where that comes from. What is success? What is prosperity? What is accomplishment in this life? The word of God teaches us that, and God has put his word in the mouth of his messenger. He has made it available to us, and the Holy Spirit is our teacher.

The Holy Spirit commissions and identifies for the church those elders that have been commissioned to shepherd the flock of God. The Holy Spirit helps individual believers identify where they can find that ministry of the word, and where they can find that guidance from the word of God. That is a God-given ministry.

It is a God-given commission. It is a God-given function. He says, be careful, because if those men begin to lead people away after themselves, if the issue becomes the man instead of the message, remember what Paul told the Ephesian elders? There are going to be ravaging wolves coming in after I am gone, who are going to lead people astray.

They are going to destroy the flock. There will be men coming up from among you who will lead men away after themselves. There is a balance, because there is a legitimate function.

Just as there was a legitimate function of the priesthood in Israel, but if people began to glorify the Levites instead of glorifying God, it was a distortion. The same thing has happened in the church today. We have many celebrity preachers.

We have many celebrity people on Christian television. We have celebrity Christian authors. It is not always their fault that they are made a celebrity, but for each individual believer, we have to look at the messenger as the source.

But the seven planets and the seven-branched candlestick are a reminder that when Jesus is pictured as standing among them, there is a divinely delegated authority. There is a divine system for the communication of God's truth, and it is for a purpose. It should accomplish something.

Paul said, I did not cease for three years to plead with you in tears on these things. So it is a wonderful background to realize that there was this counter influence of culture and of history in Ephesus that had its roots, almost literally, in a tree-based cult. In the same way that the beginning of the message is set against the seven planets, the seven stars that people thought so much of and made so much of in the mystical, magical industry, he is going to close by promising the overcomers that they will be granted the privilege of eating from the tree of life.

If people want to talk about the tree shrine and the tree cult, the goddess Artemis, by the way, was pictured in coins, symbolically associated with a date palm. Her symbol was the tree, the symbol of the city of Ephesus, their city seal, if you will, always had a tree on it. They have dug up coins.

There are 58 separate coins in the British Museum. Coins were issued locally a lot of times in those days. In Ephesus, they have 58 Ephesian coins or Asian coins that refer to Ephesus and every single one of them has a tree on it.

Trees were associated with Ephesus. Trees were associated with the Artemis cult and with the goddess Diana, great as Artemis of the Ephesians, great as Diana of the Ephesians. If you can overcome in this environment, if you can regain your first love and return to the first works, I will grant you to eat of the tree of life in the midst of the garden of God.

Paradesos, the word paradise is the Greek word for garden, in the midst of the garden of God. You want to talk about the grove of trees where that original tree shrine was located there outside Ephesus? Well, there is a garden of God. Which one is more real to you? The tree cult that you can see the goddess that you can see in the shrine or the invisible God, the Lord Jesus Christ that John communicates to you, promising the fruit of the tree of life? It is a powerful reminder to us that there are always alternatives being offered to us in our culture and from our history and in our milieu in which we live and circulate in this life.

It is essential that we not be devoured by the ravening wolves, that we not be led astray by idle talk and distracting concepts and false teachers. Remember the warning, he says, you have done a good job of identifying the false apostles that have cropped up, but you have lost your first love. Paul said to Timothy, the purpose of the commandment that I am giving you to preach the word in Ephesus is that they not lose their love.

Well, this is where we are going to have to stop for this morning. I still have not covered the details of the tree of life, but we will do that quickly next time before we move on to our second church in Smyrna. But let's close here for this morning in a word of prayer.

Father, we thank you that you have spelled out for us so clearly in your word the issues that face us as believers even as we live in a prosperous culture and a prosperous setting as the Ephesians did. We know that we are faced with many distractions, many distortions, many varieties of teachings and philosophies that claim to be grounded in your word. We ask your grace and your blessing on us that God the Holy Spirit will lead us aright, that we will rightly divide the word of truth, that we will understand the priorities and purpose that you spell out for us in our heavenly calling, that we can grow in grace and knowledge of our Savior, that we can reflect your glory and his glory in our lives both now and in the age to come.

We pray that we ourselves can be overcomers in this area and in so doing be qualified to partake of the tree of life in the midst of the garden of God. We ask your blessing on us as we go forth into the week. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.