

02-08-04b1 Revelation

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 ravaging 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.