

The Church in Ephesus

Although the Lord rebuked the shortcomings of the saints [in Ephesus], He tried His best to first praise them. How tender is He! How gracious are His acts! The Lord knows how to *honor* their good works. How these ones had worked, labored, and endured among others had not escaped the Lord's attention. The Lord also saw how *they had hated sins* and *had tried the false apostles*. The Lord also noted how *they had saved others in labor*, *how they had worked with endurance*, and how *they were untiring in their good works*. These merits were commended by the Lord. **He knows how to pay attention to one's good works**. How loveable is our Lord! Our Lord truly loves to speak well of the merits of His people. It is unfortunate that we do not have that many merits for Him to praise! Just as the apostle told the believers: "What things are true, what things are dignified, what things are righteous, what things are pure, what things are lovely, what things are well spoken of, if there is any virtue and if any praise, take account of these things" (Phil. 4:8), in the same way **the Lord loves to praise what is good in His sight**.

"I know your works." The Lord knows everything already. This is why He can judge. **It is only after the Lord has accepted a person that He will accept his work**. Those who are not saved, no matter how good their works are, can never satisfy the Lord to the extent that He would grant them salvation. Those who have entered the church must be those who have been saved. A man must first be received by the Lord before his works can be accepted by Him. These ones have works. How excellent this is! How much work do we have before the Lord that can be called work at all? These ones not only have mere faith; they have works as well.

Verse 4: "But I have one thing against you, that you have left your first love."

The Chinese Union Version translates this verse as: "But I have one thing against you." This softens the tone of the Lord and gives the impression that the Lord's rebuke was a light one. If we think that the Lord was only against them in this one thing, we may think that what the Lord was against was not something too serious. Actually, the Lord was **greatly grieved**. To forget the Lord's love and to receive this love in vain is not a small failure. It is all the more serious since they had tasted of this love. If they had left the first love at this point, would they not leave their present work in the future? The greatest degradation for a saint, and for a church as well, is to leave the first love. The first step of degradation a saint or a church takes is to depart from the first love. It is true that **our Lord praises much**, but He has a **high standard too**. Although He commended them so much, it does not mean that they were without reproach. Our Lord rebukes those whom He praises the most. His goal is perfection. It is not enough to have a good start. We have to go on according to the original condition and must advance even further.

We are not here to do yet *"another Bible study"* and pick up some *"biblical knowledge about the history of the church"*; we are here looking to the Lord for His particular speaking and shining. The Lord's word to the seven churches in Asia is very particular. Paul wrote to the churches in Phillipi and Colossae, but here the Lord Jesus Himself spoke to a group of seven churches, which represent the entire history of the church. These seven epistles are not just the apostles speaking one with the Lord, but the Lord Himself speaking directly to the churches.

God chose not two, three, or nine churches to speak to but He chose **seven actual churches** to speak in a very meaningful way; they represent the sevenfold history of the church in the church age. This speaking is applicable to all of us today and to all the churches throughout the past two thousand years. The Lord's speaking in His

epistles to the seven churches in Asia is timeless, up-to-date, and it covers the entire church age. At the end of each of the epistles He concludes with, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches; these words are serious and severe, otherwise the Lord wouldn't repeat them....We may be familiar with the content of these epistles, but we need to come to them before the Lord as **for the first time**, praying that we would have a humble spirit and a pure heart without any kind of presumptuousness. We need to let Christ as the Son of Man, the High Priest, walk in our midst and speak freely to us what is on His heart; we need to humble ourselves before Him, not assuming that we know anything, and have ears to hear. Only the Lord knows where the churches are, what is their condition, and what needs to be touched in a specific way.

Today we are not merely in the stage of Laodicea and Philadelphia, but **all the other conditions** of the churches apply to us also. We should not say, Oh, let's wait until the fulfillment of all these prophecies and then the Lord will come...rather, we should refuse to be slothful slaves or evil servants (Matt. 24:48) and be those praying to the Lord to make us His overcomers today! We need to tell the Lord, *"Lord Jesus, shine on us through Your speaking in Your word. We humble ourselves before You and we want to receive Your speaking for us. You know our condition and our situation: speak to us and grant us an ear to hear what the Spirit speaks to the churches. Touch what needs to be touched, expose what needs to be exposed, and deal with what needs to be dealt with. Lord, we just open to Your up-to-date speaking in Your word so that we may hear You and be produced as Your overcomers today!"*

Today we need to seek the Lord to walk in His way, and for this we need to read and pray over Revelation chapters 2 and 3; here the Lord shows us how to be a Christian at the end of this age. The seven epistles to the seven churches are the Lord's way for us to **return to the orthodoxy of the church**; they **start** with the Lord and **end** with a call to be the overcomers. The seven epistles to the seven churches start with the Lord and end with a call to the overcomers; the overcomers are the normal and ordinary ones; those who are not abnormal during the time of abnormality are the overcomers. **What are these "overcomers"** for whom the Lord is calling today? Are they the super-spiritual Christians, the "spiritual giants"? The overcomers the Lord desires to gain, **those who return** to the orthodoxy of the church, are normal and ordinary believers, those who are not abnormal during the time of abnormality in the churches.

For each and every situation the Lord has something to rebuke or admonish, and He also has a way for us to go on and be produced as overcomers. The overcomers are not extraordinary or super people; they are the normal, ordinary ones, those who are according to God's level. God today is calling for the overcomers to rise up and walk according to the normal pattern in the beginning; they walk according to God's never-changing word, being according to God's standard of being a Christian. Today men fail, fall, and continually go downward; even worse, the church's situation is declining and degrading, but **the overcomers are recovered anew** into the will of God. We do not know whether we are overcomers or not: not even the apostle Paul didn't assume that he was an overcomer in his last epistle, Philippians. We should all aspire to be the Lord's overcomers, those who see what pleases the Lord, what it is that He condemns, and what is the Lord's actual way for the church.

We need to aspire to be **the stars** in the Lord's hands, **the messengers** that have His fresh message. We need to tell the Lord, *"Lord, make us Your overcomers. We don't know what it means to be an overcomer, but we want to be normal according to Your standard and requirements. Impress us with what pleases You, what You condemn, and with Your actual way for us to return to the orthodoxy of the church. Lord, in the midst of this abnormal situation of the church today, grace us to be normal, continuing in the things that have been handed down to us. Recover us to the will of God and cause us to return to the orthodoxy of the church!"* (Excerpt from the *Collected Works of Watchman Nee (Set 1) Vol. 04: The Christian (2), Chapter 3*)