

Ephesus

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- [0 : 0 0] If you would turn back with me to Revelation chapter 2 and to the first letter we'll be looking at each of these letters on successive Sunday evenings up until the summer.
- And it really is what it says on the tin. It's a letter from Christ to the church and to the church in particular in Asia these seven churches that are listed almost geographically in a kind of crescent shape as one would have visited them where one would be bringing a letter to them what is now kind of Turkey, that area.
- And Jesus is bringing a letter to these churches and there's a completion about what he does because it's not just for these churches it remains a message from Jesus for all of the church for all of time.
- It could easily be letters to the churches in Edinburgh and Manchester and London and Birmingham and Glasgow and Inverness and Stornoway or whatever particular towns or cities that we would choose because the message remains relevant from these churches it is both particular to these churches but also broader because it deals with issues that are fundamental for all of us.
- And each of the churches, all of the churches together and the Christians represented in them are in a battle. Now particularly for these churches they were persecuted for physical persecution from the Domitian emperor at the time.
- [2 : 0 0] But there's really three kind of areas that they're battling against that have remained to a greater or lesser degree battles that we struggle with in the church and as individuals. There's persecution there's error and there's sin.
- So there's kind of physical opposition which was really what they were facing. There's intellectual opposition false doctrine and things like that. And there's moral opposition the kind of struggles they had with the moral dilemmas of living and following Jesus Christ in their day.
- And these three things to a greater or lesser degree affect us in our Christian lives and the battles that we face whether that be physical opposition maybe not so much of. Certainly intellectual opposition and clearly also moral struggles.
- And Jesus encourages us to listen to what he has to say and to listen to his words as the message is brought to these different churches.
- So tonight for a little while we're going to look at the first church the church in Ephesus and then at the end we're going to sing part of one of the chapters in Ephesians which reminds us of the whole emphasis to this church in Ephesus.
- [3 : 2 8] It was a well founded church. Who founded the church in Ephesus? Well it was Paul. Okay, behind that it was Christ and it was the Holy Spirit. But Paul was the one who visited Ephesus and the church was founded by Paul.
- So it had a good strong foundation and he loved that church and he loved the elders that eventually had been appointed, the leaders. He wept when they were parted and it was a good church. It was a growing church.
- He read about the founding of it and the growing of it in acts. And then of course later on Paul writes again to the church because by that time it's maybe 15 or so years later.

He sent Timothy 15 years on from a church plant. It's well established. Probably it's beginning to struggle. All churches, including St. Columba's and many of the other churches that he may be connected with and belong to, go through highs and lows, go through troughs and peaks. They go through different periods when they're maybe dry and dull or maybe then there's great vitality and life and vibrancy.

And it seems that that was the case with Ephesus as well. It's struggling after a number of years so Paul sent Timothy, the young Timothy to go and preach and teach to them.

[4 : 48] And then it's generally believed that some many years after Timothy that John, the apostle John who ends up being imprisoned on the island of Patmos, also is sent there for a while.

And here now 60 years later there's another message coming to them. So there's different messages, different leaders, different people and God is dealing with them and speaking to them and challenging them individually and corporately as a people.

So that's a very, very brief and shallow kind of introduction to the place itself. Could say a lot more, but I don't want to at this point. But we see and recognise that Christ has a message for them and a message continues to be a message for us and he cares.

Christ is the one who cares for his church. These are the words we're told of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, walks among the seven golden lamp stands. I know your deeds. And that's just a pictorial way as we see just from the previous few verses of chapter 1 of saying or pictorially saying that Christ is among his church. He walks among his church. He holds his church. And the churches are symbolically to be lamp stands, they're to be light to the world. Both individually in our lives and also collectively as a church.

The message goes out to the angel of the church or the same word as messenger. He's probably just the leader, the pastor of the church. And that message is to be brought to them. That Christ is the one who walks among the church. And that's a tremendously significant thing for us today to remember. Christ still is the one symbolically the seven stars, the seven lamp stands speak of completeness and wholeness, the whole of the church.

[6 : 48] He's the one who holds the church. The church is to have certain characteristics. And he is the one who is among the church. He cares for the church. He holds the church. Now that I think is very important for us. It's very important for us here in St. Colombo. Well, not just here in St. Colombo. Whatever the church is, we're very fortunate here. Because we have lots of people who come to church from all different backgrounds, from all different parts of the world. Some on holiday, some studying here, some coming to work. And we love the variety and the colour and the cultures that are brought among us.

And it's very important to remember that this is not the property of the free church. We are not just the free church. I'm always astonished when people will say to me sometimes, and I think I've said this to you before, people who are in the congregation, things are going well, they'll say in your church as if it's mine.

And as if they are kind of looking on from the outside. I always find that a strange thing when people say that. Things are going okay in your church, or maybe not, as the case may be, but a trouble in your church, probably easier to say it then. But we recognise from this that this is not the free church who owns us. It's not just our own church. We don't just gather together and meet in our own name.

We can become as churches, maybe particular, I don't know, maybe particularist denominations, maybe not. Maybe independent churches have the same problem. Maybe even more so. But we can become so parochial. And we can become so defensive.

We can become so protective of our own particular brand of church that we forget that this is Christ's church.

[9 : 04] That we are servants of Christ. All of us. This is His church. You belong to His church. You're part of His kingdom.

This is part of His worldwide church. And He walks among us. And we have to have His characteristics. That is what's important. That's what's central. That is what is key.

If we are a congregation, if we belong as a people together and we're not Christ centred, if Christ isn't our servant king in the right way, if He isn't our Lord and our God, then we have nothing. We are nothing. Our history, our background, our credentials, our orthodoxy, as we'll go on to see, are worthless.

We're Christ's church. And it gives us a sense of the significance of who we belong to and who cares. He cares. He walks among us.

And He says, these are my words. And He says, I know. I know you. I know what you're like. And it's great, you know, because He gives us a great pattern throughout the seven letters. They're very similar. There's commendation.

[10 : 20] He praises the churches in the most part. One or two of them, unfortunately, don't even get that. But then He also rebukes them. He highlights some areas of need. But it's a nice good balance that He brings. He begins with commendation here to this church. He says, I know your deeds.

I know your hard work. I know your perseverance. I know you cannot tolerate wicked men. You have this in your favour in verse 6.

Hate the practice of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. And that's an encouragement. He is pointing out some of the aspects of them reflecting what it means to be a lampstand, to be a shining example of Christ and His people together.

He highlights that. He says, these are good things He highlights here. And we would do well to note that ourselves. Things that He highlights here are good. I know your deeds, your hard work, your perseverance. This was a hard working church, 60 years on. How long have we been around? 1843 or so.

You can work out. I can't work out on this. You have 150 odd years and many years before that in different forms. But 10 years later laterally since we started kind of a fresh again.

[11 : 52] But this church was 60 years on. And the kind of things they spent their time doing, they were hard working. It was good. They worked hard. They were committed servants. They served God by working hard. That's a good thing. That's not unspiritual.

They weren't trying to earn their salvation. They were good hard workers for Christ and the kingdom. And He commends them for that. And that's important for us to remember. Hard work's not, we shouldn't be shy of hard work in the kingdom. We shouldn't just think that the church and the gospel progresses just by grace.

Ah man, we don't need to work hard. That's just for people who are earning their own way and we can abuse that. No, hard work's good in the kingdom. It's good to sweat for Christ spiritually. And maybe even sometimes physically. And also for their perseverance.

He commends them for their deeds, their hard work and their perseverance. They were dogged. They would have determined people 60 years on. They were getting persecuted for their faith. But they didn't give up. They kept on going. They were loyal.

They stood against opposition. These are good characteristics. Perseverance is a significant and important and very vital characteristic in the Christian life. We live in the instant generation when we expect everything today.

[13 : 20] And yet He reminds us of the significance and importance of perseverance. And also their ability to stand against false apostles of different kinds that came in and sought to rip apart the church.

False doctrine. They were sound. They knew the truth. They believed it. They tested other people who came with different truth. And they stuck to what they knew was right. Against all the odds. And what's commended here for them is they hated the evil practices of a group called the Nicolaitans who Christ also hated what they did.

And they're commended for that. Sound doctrine is to be commended. It's important to know who we believe in and what we believe. Good for us as well.

So Christ commends them. But then, because we can't stop there, Christ goes on to rebuke them. And this is a universal application. There's, I have, of this I have absolutely no doubt.

Christ rebukes. And what a rebuke it is. And it may be that we stand under this rebuke this evening ourselves. Yet this I hold against you.

[14 : 52] You've forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you've fallen. This is a great rebuke that Jesus brings upon this church in Ephesus. And continues to bring against the church as it is necessary to be given. You see, hard work in the kingdom. Perseverance for Christ. Sound doctrine and orthodoxy are nothing. They're absolutely nothing without love. Without the love of Christ at the core. Love is the cement to these things that brings them alive.

That makes them a building. That makes them significant. It's not that we can sit here today and say, well, a free church is really good on orthodoxy and on doctrine.

And that's what we'll hold on to. And maybe even persevering, but we don't need to worry about that kind of love stuff, because that's all gooey and insignificant and it's shallow. And it's not like that.

It's far from being like that. In fact, it's quite the opposite of that. It is that they have fallen from a great height. Because this central and core reality has gone from their lives. It's the picture of romantic love. First love. You know, that love where everything is embraced in the view of who you love.

All of life and all of decisions and all that we think and are and all that we exist to do. We see through that particular lens.

[16 : 44] It's that preeminent love. It's that all embracing love. It's that preoccupied love that is to be at the core of our existence as Christians.

Either thinking back to when we first came to faith, but I think it's greater than that. It's where we should all aspire to and all look to be constantly in our lives in that height, in that spiritual place where Jesus Christ was placed. That interestingly, wasn't that the prayer of Paul to the Ephesians?

We've memorized that at different points. I'm getting old. Ephesians chapter 3. You remember that great prayer, isn't it? I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit and your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts.

I pray that being rooted and established in love you may have power together with all the saints to grasp how wide and high and deep and long is the love of Christ to know this love that surpasses knowledge.

Why? So that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. The fullness of God in your life and in mine is described in terms of understanding His love and that is what they had forsaken. They bartered it for the easy things of being in a church. Anyone can be orthodox.

[18 : 24] To a degree anyone can be dogged and hard work well that doesn't require necessarily great spiritual gifts and great Holy Spirit involvement.

But love, the love of Christ in our lives requires something that we've talked about already this morning and we'll go and say about that in a minute. But Jesus says here that you've forsaken your first love and that is the language of a spurned lover, isn't it?

Christ, the broken hearted partner in a loveless marriage. A relationship where duty has replaced devotion but it's no longer the labour of love, it's just labour. There's no loyalty of love, no jealousy of love but it's kind of cold going through the motions.

And I think if we're honest with ourselves that can sound familiar in our Christian lives.

We can spend a great deal of time working hard in the Kingdom, for the Kingdom. But what is our motive?

[19 : 52] We can be dogged and determined. I'm going to church, I'll be there in the morning, I'll be there in the evening. I'll make sure I'm at the prayer meeting. I'll open my Bible and I'll say my prayers.

But deep down it's grudging. The cement of love isn't there. It's almost legalistic.

And we can have very sound doctrine. We can pride ourselves, we've been reformed and evangelical and conservative and all the different characteristics that we place on what it is to be a Christian.

But we can be superior. And we can be judgmental with that. We can be exclusivist and separatist because it isn't grounded in the love that is tremendously significant.

Christ rebukes that. He rebukes it greatly in the church. And He rebukes it in your life if you're cold tonight.

[21 : 08] If you couldn't care less for Christ. Nothing else He says is important than dealing with that. That is tremendously significant.

And He wants us to recognise that because He goes on to give us a formula to return us to that place where we should be.

We can come from the minor prophets in the Old Testament this morning and we can come to the prophetic revelation of John at the end of the New Testament. And really the message is just the same.

It's not rocket science but there's a daily ritual in our lives that He wants us to remember and to take on board. He wants us to constantly, and it's simple be coming back to Him. So Christ commands what does He command? He says, well, remember the height from which you've fallen repent and do the things you did at first.

It's very easy. Remember, recover sorry, repent and recover. That's what He wants us to do in an ongoing way. And the Bible in many places tells us as Christians to have a good memory, to engage ourselves in a good spiritual memory. Do this in remembrance of me, that the Lord's Supper is to encourage us to remember Jesus Christ as the Passover was, to remember the flight from Egypt. And so often we find Scripture reminding us to remember.

[22 : 52] Remember the height from which we've fallen. Remember past experience. Remember the simplicity and the passion of your early faith. Remember how it was in this church where they passionately grew and went on to become a hub church and planted other churches for the gospel. Where they were passionate about Jesus Christ. Remember these things. Remember what you've heard about people who are passionate for Jesus Christ and who put Him first in their lives. Go back to the cross. Remember His work.

Remember His life. Remember His death. And see that bigger picture. Consider it. Take time to do. You must take time and I must take time to do these things. And having done so He says repent. Same as this morning, isn't it? Turn back.

Turn back. Turn back to the living God. Turn back daily. See when you get up in the morning, turn to God. The decisions you have to make turn to God. The wisdom that you're seeking turn to God. Look to Him. I can't do it. I can't do it for you.

I can barely do it for myself. I need the Holy Spirit of God. I can't do it for myself. I need to depend on Him to enable me to do it. So I can only turn back as I turn back. And seek His help in so doing. And in any relationship in any relationship where there's problems where there's a barrier where love has grown cold the only answer is to deal with that barrier.

To turn back. To face your lover. To face your friend. To confess your sin or what separates you. To deal with that. And in Christ that's what we're doing. In humility and in honesty. With an ongoing daily determination this is not an emotional thing this is a choice you will make. You'll make the choice tomorrow to whom you turn. For your strength.

[25 : 16] You'll make a decision whom you will rely on. It is not an emotion we're speaking of here. It is a choice. It is an act of our will to repent, to turn back.

And as we do so we will find that we will begin to remember and seek God's forgiveness for we have ended up. Remember repent and recover. It's great doesn't it? He starts with commending their deeds, their hard work. And he also reminds him that he wants them to go back and do the hard work again.

He doesn't say that hard work isn't a good thing but he says with the motive of grace and love and relationship he says get working again. Repent and do the things you did at first. Do the important things do the significant things spiritually recover faith hope, love but do the things of love. Do these things again go back tomorrow morning to 1 Corinthians 13 where the language of love is unpacked. Not for weddings easy to read 1 Corinthians 13 for weddings but it's not describing romantic love it's describing the spiritual acts of the will that we are to participate in. The self-sacrificing servant spirit that we're to show the way we are to forgive the way that we are to live our lives and think our thoughts it's about being patient kind not envying, not boasting, not being rude not being self-seeking, not easily angered how many of us will be struggling with that tomorrow? Keeping no record of wrongs, not delighting in evil, rejoicing in the truth, protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering. These are the absolutely practical and fundamental acts of love, the deeds that we're to engage in again don't spend time being huffy with God as if He's left us or as far away or the work is too hard and we can't engage in it listen to what He says and simply do these things as we turn to Him and seek His forgiveness for not doing them again. It's the choices we'll make we can choose just to lose the rag or not by turning to God the things we struggle with, the ways we don't show these characteristics we can choose to just caress them or we can choose to turn to God repent and do these things again it's not about feelings, they will change it's about acting, about choosing the way of love. So Christ makes these commands easy for us and briefly we see also that He warns, doesn't He Christ warns if you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place. Very serious warning because He doesn't say that about their orthodoxy or their hard work or their perseverance, He says it about them not repenting and returning to their first love and He says if you don't deal with the sins that are causing you to be cold hearted towards God and if grace isn't evident in your life on a daily basis because you're not applying to the living God for forgiveness and help and hope on a daily basis, be warned that the lamp stand will be removed

Christ is reminding us that if we will not turn back, there's no guarantee that we were ever His it's of the essence in other words of the faith dependence on Him.

If He's not in our heart, we have nothing and He's also saying that if love is not at the core, love is not at the core of this congregation, by the next generation these seats will be empty, there'll be nobody here the church will close. Ephesus it would seem didn't really seem to take great deal of notice of what Jesus said here and after generations there's no church in Ephesus. We can't sit in our laurels, we can't say wow we're the free church, we've always been here this is built on castle rock, that's only a building it's the active love of a people together that propagates church growth love is a propagating characteristic the moment love ceases to be, that love of 1 Corinthians 13 the loving God and the loving one another, we will not know blessing we will not be able to plant churches we will not grow, we will not see conversions if we're relying on our hard work and this really is a very strong message to someone like me, to the minister of a congregation who often thinks that just by sheer hard work that God will bless us, not the case if we think it's just by hard work or by faithfulness or by good doctrine that this church will flourish sadly mistaken, because God says if we don't repent and if we don't allow the church to be propagated through love, and that means the way the elders speak to each other in the church session, it means the way you speak to people as you enter the church door it means the way we deal with each other in the city groups the way we care and are concerned, the way we can forgive and live together these things will enable the church to have the good soil in which to propagate growth so for someone like me, it's very significant maybe you too if you're concerned about church growth and church vitality the strategy this morning we thought was weeping whale, turn back to God, the strategy this evening is repent and turn to your first love these are the keys, that is where we will see church growth don't think it lies anywhere else because as well as warning Christ promises, he says to him who overcomes

[32 : 52] I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is the paradise of God, if we listen to him and if we act and I know it's difficult, it's difficult all the time to be repentant and renewed, and that way it's humbling and searching, but that's the way of the Spirit and if we enable him to by his grace if we can carry that burden because it's light and easy compared with the burden of trying to do it on our own then we will know the paradise of his presence in this life as kingdom, people and the expectation and hope of life in the future we're all getting older, some of you aren't getting older, some of you are very young but some of us feel we're getting older and the older that we're getting the more we consider what really matters in life and what really matters in our Christian lives and in the church to which we belong and it can never be just doctrine just effort or just perseverance these must be bound together in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and that grace covers a multitude of sins and it unites us and unity is not the Cinderella doctrine of the church it's utterly and completely crucial to all that we are and all that we believe and take encouragement I hope both as a church and I hope too in your individual what with God don't rely on just a Sunday fix of religion be a worshiping person be a repenting person, be someone who is in daily relationship with living

God and filled with the Spirit of God of what we saw this morning of His great love and also of His care for this church as He's given to us here that's our heads and pray Lord God we ask and pray that you would teach us your ways and that you would lead us in your truth we pray that it would be a humble people a humble community pray that we would be gentle and yet strong in the way we live that we would consider others better than ourselves that we would put into practice the gutsy and the tough characteristics of love not tough in their exterior but tough in the demands that they place on our self-absorption and our judgmental spirit Lord help us to be gracious help us to remind ourselves of what we've been forgiven so that we bountifully and freely are able to forgive others long suffering hard on our own sinful shortcomings easy on others

Lord God help us to have a first love a preeminent love and absorbing love not slushy and romantic in a way that might repel the tough among us but in a godly way in a way that we've been created to be and created to live help each one of us to be like that Lord God by your spirit we ask as a congregation tonight we ask that you would accept our plea for forgiveness for when we have fallen short of your standards when as the body of Christ we have not reflected what we ought to have been when we have been divided or selfish or cruel or unkind or uncaring forgive us for these things forgive us as leaders in the church for not always examining what we should forgive us as people and help us to find great freedom and peace in repentance and in the new beginnings that repentance brings and fill us with both hard work, a persevering spirit and a good sound doctrine coming from and cemented by the grace that sets us free

For Jesus' sake we ask these things. Amen.