



**Sunday, 6 February 2022**

**Message to the Church at Ephesus – Revelation 2: 1-7.**



Good morning. Today we start a new series of Bible studies. And they're in one of the hardest book in the Bible to understand - the last book - the Book of Revelation. The good news is, the first three chapters are the easiest to get a handle on, and over the next few weeks we'll be looking at Jesus' messages in chapters 2 & 3 to seven first century churches in what is modern day Turkey, but which in those days was known as Asia

Minor.

But to start with, a little bit of background. The author is John the brother of James and one of Jesus' inner circle of three disciples He had while He on earth. John also wrote the fourth gospel. But I'm a bit reticent to call him 'the author' - as it quickly becomes apparent from the start that either Jesus or the Holy Spirit is the source of the content of this book. John is more of less an observer or listener who logs down what he's told or what he sees.

Most commentators agree that this book was written in the later part of the first century by a now elderly John who'd been exiled to an island not too far away from Turkey called Patmos. Now years ago I thought that John was kept on this island for the rest of his life, but it looks like he might have only been exiled to Patmos for about 18 months. And it was during this time that he produced the Book of Revelation. After that it's general believed that he returned to Ephesus. And it's to Ephesus we will be going in a moment. But first I need also to say something else.



And that is, that I'm wondering if this series should be eight weeks long and not seven. Because the vision of a risen, awesome, Jesus in chapter one is integral to aspects of the content of the messages Jesus gave to these seven churches. But hopefully that will come out as we hear what He has to say.

And with that, let's read Revelation Ch.2, verses 1-7, and I'm using the NIV translation.

So..... *"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:*

*These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in his right*



*hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

*I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.*

*Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favour: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

*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."*

And I immediately I have a problem. Jesus self-identifies Himself as 'Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands'. But that's straight out of chapter one, where we find it's part of the image John sees of the risen Christ. And as it's a vision - it's a bit like a dream where things are not always literally as you see them. So they're symbols. But also in chapter one Jesus conveniently explains their meaning to John. He tells him the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches that He's about to send messages to, and the lampstands represent the seven churches themselves - presumably because they're intended to be the means of holding Jesus light in the dark surroundings they live in. A bit like South Ruislip Christian Fellowship is intended to be a lampstand in South Ruislip for God's light to shine out from us here. You get the picture.

Let me just interrupt myself for a moment for a brief aside. When you read the Bible, you need to consider what you're reading in context - be that the context of surrounding chapters, or the context of the history behind the content. So the context here is the risen, exalted Jesus ruling and reigning in His Church. He's not only Lord of eternity, but Lord over His Church on earth as well as the angels in heaven. But the context is also the situations pertaining in the locations of each of these seven churches that He writes to. My remit today is to just talk about the first century church at Ephesus, but I'm anticipating my fellow speakers will fill you in the coming weeks with the circumstances surround the other six churches as we go through the series.

Aside over - now let's look at the risen Jesus' message to the church at Ephesus - but we'll first need to look at the city of Ephesus, and at the first century church in that city as the recipient of Jesus' message.



Today Ephesus is a historical site. To give you some idea of the place, this is the ruins of Ephesus' library. The history of Ephesus goes back a long way, and it's location moved slightly down the years, but the ruins you can visit today are from the Roman period, so dated to NT times. It was a port city, although with silting up the sea's now some six miles away. And it was the key administrative city in the Roman

province of Asia. So think of it as the local area's London to get a feel for its importance.



Religion-wise, it had two main strains. The first was the goddess, Artemis, also known as Diana. And if you've read the Book of Acts and Paul's missionary journey's, that name will be familiar to you - as there was a riot in Ephesus directly caused by Paul's introduction of Christianity to the city being instrumental in ruining the trade in silver idols, just like the one shown.

The other strain was Emperor worship. Interestingly the practise of worshipping living emperors happened in the provinces but not in Rome itself. But seeing as Ephesus was a provincial capital, it had this Roman Imperial Cult. We know from information external to the Bible that Ephesus was known as 'Temple Warren' for two Ephesian temples dedicated to the Imperial Cult, as well as 'Temple Warren' for the goddess Artemis. So that's how big these idolatrous influences where in Ephesus.



And both of these in-your-face aspects of Ephesus' society are background to problems faced by the Christians in Ephesus in this period. But more on that later.

Now we don't know if there were visitors from Ephesus in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost to take what happened then back home. But we do know that the message of Jesus' salvation did come to Ephesus with Paul's preaching around AD52. In fact, Paul spent up to three years teaching and



preaching in Ephesus - which for him, seems a long time in one place. He was aided by Aquila and Priscilla, who were then aided by Apollo. And after Paul left, he appointed his protégé Timothy to continue his work. Add to that that we know that John, the same John of the Book of Revelation, spent time at Ephesus, and you now know some very big guns of early Christianity were associated with this local church - or perhaps that's 'churches' - as it's thought they may have been a group of house churches working together.

So perhaps it's not so strange that Jesus commences His message to them with this commendation. *"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false."* So any false teaching anyone attempted to introduce into this assembly of Christians would be treated like a germ dropped into a bottle of bleach!

I'll be asking us a question related to that in a moment. But first, I want to draw your attention to two words. "I know". And you'll be hearing them again and again every week of this seven week series, as Jesus starts His evaluation of each and every one of these churches with them.

If you were living in China today, you'd be living in one of the most surveillance sensitive countries on the planet. Modern electronic technology is being increasingly used to monitor the whole population to an extreme degree. Face recognition in public spaces and communication monitoring are used by a regime intent on knowing exactly what you're doing and who you're doing it with. And I read somewhere they even want to install face recognition equipment inside churches - those they haven't shut down.

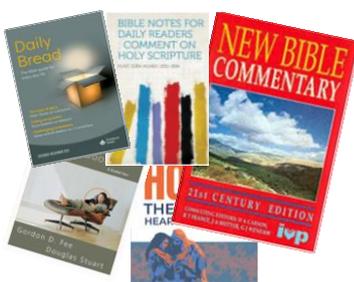
But when Jesus says, "I know", He doesn't need any of those sort of means. If I had time, I'd like to read the whole of Psalm 139 to you - slowly. But just to give you a flavour, the author says this about God: *"You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue You, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and You lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain."* And that's the platform on which the messages to these seven churches stands. Because our all-knowing God says time and time and time again, "I know".

And the first thing He wants these Christians to know is that He's aware of their tenacious hold on to the Truth that gives error no room to breed. So I now need to ask the question - "How well equipped are we to be able to receive the same commendation from Jesus in twenty-first century South Ruislip?"



Of course... we haven't got a Timothy or Aquila and Pricilla living just around the corner to inquire of, and Paul and John aren't a mere text message away to consult. But never-the-less we are blessed - because we have the Bible in our own language in many translations and paraphrases. And we have had centuries of people who've worked at understanding its message to help us effectively get into its content. And that's because in previous generations people have given up their lives to make that possible. We are blessed.

So some more questions. First - how much do you value the Bible we have - you have - and then - how well do you know it? And also - how well can you use it as a weapon against falsehood? Let's be specific. There are some street preachers who were recently arrested for teaching from the Bible that homosexuality is not right according to God's way of thinking. Are they right? Or are they misrepresenting God? Is the society norm around us correct, or is it not at all right? And Christians need to have answers to such things that they can rely on - because it is not just down to our opinion, not even the teaching of a particular Church denomination, but right because it's what God has said about it. Or what about divorce? What does God say about that? Or come to that, relationships in general, be they marriage, work, church or family? Or what about... Prosperity Theology - the idea that says at a fundamental level that if you scratch God's back he'll scratch yours - and forgets the hundreds upon hundreds of our brothers and sisters who today aren't becoming prosperous as a reward for their faithfulness - but are being killed for it. So the question really is - how well do you know the Christian disciple's handbook - the Bible?



And I know I've said these sort of things before - but I'm not apologising because it is such an important part of living a Christian lifestyle and we live in a country where we have so many aids to understanding the Bible, from various daily Bible reading notes to more in depth Bible study commentaries - and we live in a country where owning them won't get you thrown into prison - which you can't say for everywhere in the world.

Before I move on - another word of commendation from Jesus for this local church at Ephesus. He commends them for their perseverance. You see, the Christian life is a marathon not a sprint. We're called to be spiritual Mo Farrah's - not a Usain Bolt's. Don't believe me? Hear what Hebrews 12 has to say to us: *"Therefore.... let us throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."* Discipleship is a lifetime long event.



And then Jesus tells the Ephesians that they had something else in their favour - they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as He did.

Hate is a very strong word, and here it is Jesus who's using it. Someone's said that it means that He finds them utterly repulsive. So the question must be, who were these Nicolaitans, and what were their deeds?

We can thank the writings of two of the early Church's leaders for the little information we know about them. It appears the name comes from them being followers of a man called Nicolas of Antioch, who was actually one of the first seven church deacons mentioned in Acts 6:5, but obviously later went his own way. Acts 6:5 tells us that he was a 'convert to Judaism' - so he'd started out in Paganism, converted to Judaism, and then to Christianity, which might actually be material to the heresy that now bore his name. Because basically it was a belief that you could intermingle different religions together, and there was nothing unique or separate - in other words - 'holy' - about believing in Jesus.

Which in the local context of Ephesus meant you could participate in the practices of the worship of Diana, attend the activities associated with the worship of the Emperor, and also break bread and drink wine every Sunday to celebrate Jesus. It was a belief system of compromise. And within the add-ons brought in by this belief system was not only idolatry, but also immorality. Which is why some people couple this error to Jesus message to the church at Pergamum (which we'll look at in two weeks time) where the teachings of Balaam from the OT is mentioned. But the fact is, all these compromises destroy the faithful discipleship we are called to live.



So - bringing it up to date, what Nicolaitan influences have we bought into in our twenty-first century Christianity - not now from this man's deviation from the Truth, but from the multitude of influences in the societies around us?

Let me make a few suggestions of possibilities. And let's start by thinking broad - because the real reason behind the Nicolaitan deviations was a desire to 'fit in'. So what in your lifestyle has more to do with fitting in at work or at home with others' accepted norms than with what Jesus prescribes?

That could be to do sexual stuff, the ideas and practices that our society now



deems OK, that if you ran them past Jesus would be considered compromises with purity? Or maybe it could be nearer the deviations of the Biblical church at Ephesus than we'd care to admit - acceptance of occult powers or influence of the stars. Or is it maybe the magnetic draw of materialism and its envious grip on our fallen human nature. But it could actually be just about anything we have slipped into doing down the years that compromises our obedience to Christ - and if you overlaid the principles of faithfulness to God that we find in the Bible it wouldn't show up too well? So maybe it's back to knowing the Bible again as our framework for living.

And if you think, *But we're not likely to get tripped up by such things*, think again. When I was a very much younger man I got involved with a Christian telephone ministry in Harrow. I'd actually felt something in my spirit, a sort of disquiet at the time, but being much younger and perhaps more humble, I'd thought the problem was me not being spiritual enough as I was around these super-Christians. Until it came out that the guy running the show was encouraging people in the group to sleep around in trial marriages.

I need to leave you to ponder the personal implications of these thoughts for yourself later, because I must now move on to look at Jesus words to this church where He says, "Yet I hold this against you...".

If you were a first listener to this message being read - you might have been patting yourselves on the back on the quality of your discipleship - but hearing Jesus said this would have burst your bubble. For Jesus says, "Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen!". Oops! But we need to ask, "What is Jesus talking about"? What did He mean by, "You've lost your first love"?

So now I have a little work for you! What I'd like you to do - is to get together in small groups, or just with the people close to you, and for no more than two or three minutes, see if you can answer that question. Let's be quick in getting together as I really do mean no more than two or three minutes.

#### PAUSE & ANSWERS

Commentators take two views on what Jesus was talking about here. But rather than take an 'either or' approach, I'm going to treat it as a 'both and' - and say that Jesus could have been concerned about both their love for each other, and, their love for Him and His call on their lives.

On at least one occasion while Jesus walked the earth He said something like - take note of everything the Pharisees teach you, but don't live the

way they do. And He accused the Pharisees of telling people what they should do, but not lifting a finger to help them do it. The Pharisees as a movement had started off as a group of God-fearing Jews seeking to serve God the best they could - but by Jesus' time they'd become legalistically precise and humanly cold (as well as being proud and deceitful, but that's another story). And one way Jesus could be admonishing the late first century disciples of the church at Ephesus was for getting into the same cold-hearted mind-set.

So - how warm is our affection for each other in the church? Perhaps we could ask, how costly is it, because that might give a measurable answer? Or maybe another way of asking the question is to ask 'how practical is it'?

Do you remember the answer Jesus gave to the question about the most important commandment? Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Of course Jesus told at least one parable pointing to the fact that your neighbour is more than just your brother or sister in the church. So we look at specific teachings in various NT letters to flesh out detailed applications for our lives.

But the answer Jesus gave about the greatest commandment does bring us nicely onto the other thread of thinking about what He meant when He said to the church at Ephesus 'you've lost your first love'. They didn't love Him like they did when they first believed in Him.

At this point I did think of getting Nicki to come on the platform and talk about Arsenal (that's a football team for the uninitiated!). The trouble is, I'd probably have had trouble getting her to go back and sit down again! And the reason I'd have had the problem levering her off the platform is that she would be animated with a passion about her favourite team.

You see, while it's not a good translation, if Jesus had said, "Yet I hold this against you; you've lost the passion you used to have", it could work as a reasonable paraphrase. Not of course that the Ephesians had lost their passion for the periphery things of Christianity - because Jesus has already complimented them on that - but they had lost their passion for Him. Because Christianity is based on a relationship, not a rule book. And so serious did Jesus take this change in them, He says, "Consider how far you have fallen - and repent!". That's the same word used for when we first come to believing in Him. In other words, turn around and go in the



opposite direction. And He even adds the dire consequence that if they don't, their church will cease to exist. That's the meaning of removing their lampstand.

I wonder how this 'loss of their first love' was being seen in their lives? One suggestion is that it was a loss of a clear witness in their lives. They had lost their zeal to tell others about who Jesus is and what he'd done for them. And if you want to know what that sort of witnessing looks like, just think back to last week, and Samuel's testimony about what God did for him, and I don't need to say much more. But that doesn't mean you've got to have the same sort of testimony as Samuel. My experience of God is nothing like Samuel's - but it is just as real!

And a loss of a clear witness to what God had done for them fits with the threat to remove their lampstand, because it was supposed to hold out the light of the world to others - and if it wasn't - what was the point of it being there? Back to the idea of supporting a football team - and if you're enthusiastic - you share that enthusiasm. So maybe 'enthusiasm for sharing Jesus' could also fit as a paraphrase for what they lost.

Today Ephesus is just a historical archaeological site - although in the couple of centuries following the writing down of this letter it remained a powerful Christian witness and gave martyrs to Christian history, so we may presume they took note. But what about us in twenty-first century South Ruislip? What are we supposed to take away from this message for us today? And how do you show a genuine passion for Jesus today? Is it for instance making a lot of noise in church with our style of worship? Is that the sort of passion for Jesus He says is missing? I'd say not. It goes much deeper.

One man I know of who 'walked the walk' of loving Jesus was a young American named David Wilkinson. He saw in the news a criminal trial being held in NY in 1958 of seven members of a street gang. He felt the Holy Spirit leading him to up sticks from a church in Pennsylvania and go to NY to tell the drug addicts and gang members of that city about Jesus. One day one gang member said to him, "I could cut you in little pieces." To which David Wilkinson replied, "Yes. And every piece would say "I love you".".

And that's something else about the love that Jesus found this church in Ephesus had lost. It wasn't a quantity matter - it was quality issue. So where do we get this quality of love, because one thing's for sure, what we can't do is produce it by our own willpower.

If you go to John's gospel 14:15 you'll find it says this, "*If you love Me, keep my commands* (or as I heard God say distinctly to me one morning



going to work on the Tube, "All I ask is that you do what I tell you.") but the verse goes on to say – "*and I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever*". Actually - that's a bit of a chicken and egg statement, because we can't love, or obey, God without the help of God the Holy Spirit being with us and within us. But what God wants from us is a willingness to be available to be filled with Himself so that He is then able to help us to live the life that we should as His children. And that's the same for us as it was for those first century Ephesian Christians.

So in conclusion - please - let us love as we should - both God with passionate obedience - and those around us with genuine loving affection.

*Granville Richards.*