

The Seven Letters (2): Ephesus

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Date: 24 May 2026

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now from God's Word in Revelation chapter 2.! You'll find this on page 1028.

Revelation chapter 2. We'll read from verse 1 to verse 7.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

I know that you're enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned or forsaken the love you had at first.

[1 : 18] Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Yet, this you have. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who is an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Amen. Every church is healthy in its own ways and unhealthy in its own ways.

There's no such thing as an absolutely healthy church for even those which, on the outside, seem to be the healthiest, have areas where they are unhealthy.

It's been said that if you find a perfect church, don't join it because you'll only go and spoil it. Our church here in Crow Road is healthy in some areas and unhealthy in other areas.

[2 : 31] And one of the objectives of our studies in these seven letters of Revelation is to identify and remedy areas of spiritual unhealth in our congregation.

Now, Ephesus was the primary city of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. It was a center of trade and government and culture.

It was wealthy. It had 200,000 inhabitants or so, so about the same size as Dundee. But there the comparisons fall.

It was home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple to the Greek goddess Artemis. Ephesus features heavily in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul spent time there founding and establishing a strong church. After he left, he wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus, the letter of Ephesians.

[3 : 31] According to tradition, after Jesus' resurrection, the apostle John took the blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of our Lord, to Ephesus, where she died and is buried.

John, the apostle, was in Ephesus in later life. Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to deal with problems in the church there. So the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy were written to Timothy in Ephesus.

So of all the churches in the New Testament, we probably know most about the church in Ephesus. It's good points and it's bad points, the ways in which it was healthy and the ways in which it was unhealthy.

So it's no surprise that Jesus chooses Ephesus as the first church to which he writes a letter. As well as being the most famous church in Asia Minor, it was probably the biggest.

It just goes to show that big churches are not necessarily any healthier than small churches.

Because while Jesus has many good things to say about the church in Ephesus, he's got his criticisms also.

[4 : 45] He describes himself in verse 1 as him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. Taken from imagery we saw last week in Revelation 1, Jesus wants the Ephesian Christians to know that he is always with them by his Spirit and that he's

aware of the situation they find themselves in and how they respond to it.

We need to remember this. Jesus holds the seven stars in his right hand. Jesus walks among the seven golden lampstands. Jesus is among us.

He is with us. He is aware of how we live as individual Christians and as a family of Christians here. He sees what we're like when we're together and he sees what we're like when we're apart.

And that's why he says, I know your works. He knows our works. He knows all about what we do as a congregation and he knows all about who we are as a congregation, our attitude toward him, toward each other, and toward those on the outside.

He knows how we deal with disagreements and he knows how we deal with those who are struggling and weak. He knows those among us who are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks.

[6 : 08] And he sees how we encourage them and support them. He hears our prayers on their behalf and he hears us as we worship him together. He knows our works.

He sees our sin. And he hears our gossip and slander. He is with us. He is closer to us than we are to each other. We live as Crow Road Free Church, Coram Deo, in the face of God.

What difference would it make to us this morning, do you suppose, if we lived in the full awareness of the risen Christ's presence with us?

Would it not make us, as a congregation, more prayerful, more reverent, more committed to him, more committed to each other, and to the mission he set us of proclaiming the gospel to the nations?

When we gather together to worship him like we are at the moment, would it not focus our praise to know that the Son of God who loved me and gave himself on the cross for me sees us and is with us and he knows us?

[7 : 22] Well, having introduced himself in this way as the one who is with this church, the living Christ makes three comments concerning this church in Ephesus. Doctrinal correctness, devotional coldness, and divine commitment.

And we'll go through each one. I wonder, are these areas in which we are healthy as Crow Road Free Church or unhealthy? Jesus, of course, would have us healthy in them all.

And so perhaps as we go through each one, we need to inwardly repent if we should feel challenged or convicted. First of all then, doctrinal correctness.

Doctrinal correctness. Verses 2 and 3, Jesus says, I know your works, your toil, your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and found them to be false.

I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. In verse 6, he says, Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

[8 : 37] When you arrived at the front door of the church in Ephesus, there was no such thing, but never mind, you knew that you were entering the Hall of Orthodoxy. One thing was for sure, they believed all the right things.

And in some ways, this is quite surprising. The letters of 1 and 2 Timothy were written to Timothy, the pastor of the church in Ephesus, some 25 years before Jesus' letter in Revelation.

In 1 and 2 Timothy, we find the church riddled with false teaching. There was a dangerous belief that Jesus hadn't really come in the flesh, but what people saw in Jesus was not a real man, but some kind of spiritual, ghostly figure.

He only seemed to be human. Now, these false teachers, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and Jewish superstition, considered flesh to be evil, impure, and corrupt.

So, the thought that God had become flesh in the man Christ Jesus was blasphemous to them. So, they taught, therefore, that Jesus only seemed to be human, but was, in reality, some kind of mysterious spirit.

[9 : 58] Because flesh to these false teachers was evil and unimportant, they had no problem with Christians living in an immoral way and doing whatever they wanted with their bodies.

What's important to one's relationship to God is your spirit. It's not your flesh. So, if you want to pollute your flesh with any kind of immoral practice, that's fine.

It's not like those who say, well, you know, I'm saved by grace, so I can now live any way I want to. I can sleep with whoever I want to sleep with.

I can drink as much as I drink. And I can take as many drugs as much as I want. These false teachers found many receptive listeners in the church in Ephesus, especially among the young woman.

And they were called, as is said in verse 6 here, I'm never very sure how to pronounce this, the Nicolaitans, perhaps because they were followers of a false teacher called Nicholas who taught these things.

[11:09] You know, once false teaching gets into a church, it's really difficult to get rid of it. It festers and it grows like a rotten apple in a barrel. You can get rid of the apple, but you cannot get rid of the rot. Well, the church in Ephesus was plagued by this kind of false teaching.

They had tested these so-called apostles, these false teachers, and had found them to be false. They had refused to tolerate them, but the false teachers had persisted, spreading their poison. Yet, for the sake of Christ, rather than give in to this incessant drip, drip, drip pressure from the false teaching, the Ephesian Christians did not give up, but bore patiently with it for the sake of Jesus. They did not grow weary in proclaiming the truth about Jesus, that He was fully man and fully God. Here is the mark of doctrinal correctness.

Not only did the Ephesian church refuse to tolerate false teaching, but they constantly and unerringly upheld the true teaching of Jesus and His gospel.

[12:22] In our setting, it would be like me standing up here and saying, the Bible is not really the Word of God. You can't trust the whole Bible. That's false teaching. But that's only half the story.

To actually be doctrinally correct, we need to prove why the Bible is inerrant, inspired, authoritative. So, for all the world, the church in Ephesus reminds me a little bit of a reformed evangelical church like ours.

You can be sure that when you walk into a church like ours, we've got our doctrine straight. We know what false teaching looks like. We're good at showing that it's false.

Our library contains hundreds of rich, theologically insightful books. Now, albeit, I don't think any of us are arrogant enough to think that we've got it all 100% right.

We are a healthy church in our knowledge, understanding, and proclamation of the great truths of the gospel. I and one or two others from the congregation here were at a funeral recently where the minister said all the right things but missed the fundamental truth of the gospel that Jesus died for our sins, what we would call substitutionary atonement.

[13:41] On the cross, Jesus wasn't dying for good people to give us the reward of heaven. He was dying for sinful people to give us the gracious gift of forgiveness.

I'd like to think that's a trap we wouldn't fall into in the free church. That's good. That's healthy. Confessional orthodoxy is important.

What we believe about God is important. We must believe the right things about Him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Holy and Blessed Trinity. Three in one and one in three.

We must believe the right things about the way of salvation through Jesus Christ that He died as our substitute on the cross and rose to never dying life. We must believe the right things about ourselves and our need of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

And again, I don't think any of us are arrogant enough to believe we've got it all right. If any of you think we do, you're wrong. But if there is one area in which we're healthy as the free church, surely it's here, confessional orthodoxy.

[14:49] Perhaps, though, it's not really that surprising that the church in Ephesus was so well trained theologically, given that the apostle Paul, the apostle John, and Timothy had spent so much time there.

The temptation, however, is for us to treat, and we'll talk about this again maybe after the summer, the temptation for us is to treat our confessional correctness as a badge of honor and become proud.

Our theology is to be a living thing. Our theology is to inform our praise, fuel our devotion, motivate our mission.

A dead theology is poison. A living theology brings joy, endurance, and holiness. It's not enough to know theology. It's more important to let our theology live and breathe in the wholesome air of the family we call Crow Road Free Church.

We must keep on bringing the great truths of Scripture to light, preaching all the theology we know for the glory of God and the good of the people of Scotland.

[16:03] Doctrinal correctness. Secondly here, we have devotional coldness. Coldness. Yet I have this against you, he says in verse 4.

You have abandoned the love you had at first, your first love. I find it very ironic that a lack of love is the basis for Jesus' criticism of the church of the Ephesians.

Remember how Paul wrote in Ephesians 5, walk in love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. The apostle John had spent considerable time in Ephesus and he wrote, here in his love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and gave his son as the propitiation for our sins.

It's ironic that it should be love which is the weak point of Ephesus. Given the examples of love they'd seen in Paul and John and the teaching they had received.

However, this is where their weakness lay. They had lost the love they'd had at first, their first love. Now, what is this first love? It could in the first instance be their love for God.

[17:24] Their love for God. When they first believed, they were filled with what one commentator calls heart-burning love and affection.

Do you remember what it was like to be filled with heart-burning love and affection for Christ? They couldn't get over how much God loved them and the sheer magnitude of how much Christ had given for them.

Their hearts were filled with zeal for God but over time their zeal had cooled for all their doctrinal correctness. They were devotionally cold.

Love for God had stopped being a lived experience and had become more of a memory. But in the second instance, their first love could be their love for fellow Christians.

From descriptions of life in the early Ephesian church, we see they really loved each other. They went the extra mile to forgive one another, to live together in unity and to sacrifice their interests on behalf of others.

[18:31] But now, at the end of the first century, not so much. They'd become this loveless institution, this theological seminary rather than a loving family.

The love they had for each other had dissipated faster than a morning fog. But thirdly, their first love could correspond to their love for non-Christians, those outside the church.

We're talking here about their evangelistic zeal. It is so easy for confessionally orthodox churches to become introverted, to wring the wagons, to call the world outside evil, refuse to engage with the world, and forget that the church was designed to be salt and light.

It was designed to be the hospital for sinners, the embassy of heaven and earth, inviting men and women to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to be saved. It could be the evangelistic zeal of the Ephesian church had gone.

Now, these three first loves are vitally connected to each other, but they find their ultimate cause in a loss of love for God, a loss of love for God.

[19:48] When we stop loving God as we should, we stop loving other Christians as we should, and we stop loving the world as we should. So, the challenge for us is this, where is our burning love for Jesus?

Where is our burning love for Jesus when we first believed in Him? love for Him burned in our hearts. What about now? Has our love for the pleasures and comforts of this world cooled our love for God?

Sadly, and I'm sure some of you can identify with me here, some of the most bitter, unforgiving, and unloving Christians I have ever met have been those who prided themselves most on their doctrinal and theological correctness.

This should not be. Those who know most about God should love God most. By their lack of love for Him, they show that whereas they might know much about God, they do not love Him.

What is the solution for a church which is devotionally cold, but doctrinally correct? Well, Jesus says three things briefly. He says, first of all, remember.

[21:16] Remember. Verse 5, remember. Remember the height from which you have fallen. Remember what Jesus saved you from.

Many years before this, Paul had written to them and said in Ephesians 2, by nature, by nature you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to walk. You were by nature creatures of wrath.

Have we forgotten our pre-Christian depths of depravity and the curse of the condemnation of our sin which stood against us? Remember, it is by grace that we're Christians at all.

We did not deserve it. This is no reward. We did not earn it. The Lord Jesus Christ died to graciously give us life and salvation. Remember it. Secondly, he says in verse 5, repent, repent. We'll come back to this in two weeks' time. To repent means to turn your thinking around. What has once you thought left, now you think right.

[22 : 25] What has once you thought back, now you think forward. It means to change your mind and from there to change your attitude, your actions, your whole way of life. As we look into our hearts and realize that our love for Christ has grown cold, our love for Christians and the world outside has cooled, we realize that we belong wall.

Remembering that once we were far away from God, we repent of our devotional coldness. We change our minds and realize that all this time we have been wrong, most terribly wrong. And thirdly, Paul says in verse 5, sorry, Jesus says in verse 5, return to the works you did at first. Return to the works you did at first. Get back to the love you first had for God by engaging once more in what you did when you first believed.

Do you remember when you first became a Christian? how precious the Bible was to you and remember how much you enjoyed praying. Get back to loving God's people again, remembering how much when you first became a Christian you benefited from fellowship with other Christians and how committed you were to serving the church when you first believed.

Get back to loving the world, remembering how boldly when you first became a Christian you shared the gospel with your family and your friends. Remember, repent, return.

[24 : 02] For all our doctrinal correctness is this a word for us this morning. Are our systematic theology books read more than our Bibles?

Do we spend more time listening to theological podcasts than we do praying? Are we committed to fellowship in the church? Are we active in sharing our faith?

The Lord Jesus knows but I guess in our heart of hearts we know also. Now I cannot say hand on heart whether we're healthy or unhealthy in this area.

Only the risen Christ knows but whatever the condition of our church we are ultimately responsible for our own hearts. So, in faith and by the spirit let's make every effort not to let that first love grow cold and if it has remember repent and return.

Thirdly and very briefly divine commitment, divine commitment. Now the church in Ephesus was wealthy in many ways not least being this Christ had not given up on them but such wealth was in danger.

[25 : 20] Jesus says to them in verse 5, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. For all that the church has described in the introduction to this letter as a lampstand, Christ will remove the light from them.

He will withdraw from them. He will no longer be present with them in His blessing and empowering Holy Spirit. Imagine a church which is doctrinally correct, theologically orthodox, but is Christless. It is quite a terrifying prospect that a church could look like a church but not be a church at all because the risen Christ has left the building.

It would be worth us reflecting on this question, discussing it perhaps over our coffee after the service. Would you notice if Christ was no longer present with us during our services?

[26 : 28] Would you notice? How would it change who we are, what we do? We bear many of the marks of a very healthy church according to the gurus who talk about such things, although I don't believe half of what they say, but Christ's not with us.

This is a very real threat against which we must be on guard. Of course, we pray for doctrinal correctness and we pray for devotional warmth, but ultimately we pray for the presence of the living and risen and exalted Christ among us, and that's why we pray, Lord, be present with us today as we worship you.

the letter began with Jesus describing himself as walking among the seven lampstands. Each of these lampstands, I've only got five fingers crossed, so I can't illustrate this correctly, was a menorah.

It was a seven-branched candle designed to be a picture of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. Imagine seven, yeah, okay, you don't get any idea.

The branches of the candle are like the branches of a tree. The tree of life was in the Garden of Eden, the paradise of God, from into which our first parents, Adam and Eve, were placed in the beginning, and from which they were expelled because of their sin.

[27 : 50] The earthly Eden with those trees is gone, but the earthly Eden was only ever a picture itself of the greatest of all paradises, the glory of God in heaven, the throne of His majesty, on which sits the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The commitment of God to the one who conquers, the one who regains his or her first love, is that he or she will eat of that tree of life, not in the Garden of Eden, but in that ultimate paradise of God. Later on in Revelation 21, we learn more about that tree, but although I don't have time to explain all the details to you, it's already five past twelve, this tree is itself a picture and an image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a picture, an image of the Lord Jesus Christ. My go-to commentator on this is a friend of mine and others in this congregation, I think Helen knows him quite well, Professor Douglas Kelly. He writes, Jesus is the tree of life. In this world, as we believe his gospel, we come to him and we eat and live.

[29 : 15] He puts abundant and eternal life into us. The more we remember him and his grace, the more sense of the presence of Jesus we have.

The more we remember him and his grace, the more sense of the presence of Jesus we have. And this is the important point, the more we begin to experience the reality of the heaven to come.

In other words, the more we remember Jesus and his grace, the more sense of the presence of Jesus we have among us here, the more we begin to experience a foretaste of the reality of the heaven to come, the paradise of God, the tree of life.

Jesus, our risen Lord, planted on the throne of heaven today, extends his nourishing branches to us while we yet live on earth.

For those who by remembering, repenting and returning regain their first love for him, he will give them even more life and he'll give them a renewed sense of his presence with him.

[30 : 29] Just as God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening in the garden of Eden, so Jesus assures us that if we conquer, he will walk with us through all of life's ups and downs, through all of its peaks and troughs.

And you see, therefore, this is a promise not just of future paradise with Christ, but of present presence. A presence of Christ which fills us with joy, peace and zeal, that kind we had when we first believed in him, a presence we long to experience again.

This is the promise of God to us today. If we shall return to our first love, we shall once again experience the depths of the love, strength and grace of Christ we had never thought it possible to regain.

For he who walks among the seven lampstands will walk with us as Crow Road Free Church and empower us for worship, mission and service.

Brings us back to that earlier challenge and with this we close. If Christ was no longer present with us in our worship services, no longer present in our fellowship, no longer present in our individual Christian lives, we would we even notice.

[31 : 51] It is not our doctrinal correctness which makes us healthy, although that is important. It is our love for Christ and even more importantly, his love for us. The Christ who walks among the lampstands once walked the hill, once walked the road to the hill on which he was crucified.

Those hands which hold the seven stars were once nailed to the cross and it was for us. He sacrificed himself for us because his love for us burned so brightly.

What then shall we do for him? He knows us. He knows our hearts. In light of these things, is it not time that we put our faith and trust in him and love him?

because he first loved us. Thank you.