

The church in Ephesus

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[0 : 00] The first of two readings is, as you see, from the book of Revelation, page 1, 2, 3, 5 in the Church Bibles. Revelation chapter 1.

The Revelation to John. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place.

He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth, to him who loves us, and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom priest to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

[1 : 27] Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

Even so, Amen. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, Write what you see in a book, and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamon, and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands. In the midst of a lampstands was one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

[2 : 45] The hairs of his head were white like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, Fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one.

I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore. And I have the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, those that are, and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

[3 : 58] Revelation 2, 1-7, page 1, 2, 3, 6 in the church Bibles. To the angel of the church in Ephesus writes, 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 you are 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 the love you had at first. 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 has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[5 : 21] To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. David, thanks very much for reading.

Let me lead us in prayer as we start. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you very much that you are indeed a God who has spoken through the prophets, both through the Old Testament prophets, through the New Testament apostles.

We praise you, therefore, for your living, lively word, and we pray you would help us to take it to heart this morning. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Well, if you close your Bible, do keep it open again at Revelation chapter 2 on page 1236.

We're starting our summer series of talks this morning, looking at this letter to the seven churches in Revelation. All the churches are in what was the Roman province of Asia, now the western part of Turkey.

[6 : 29] Revelation, we're told in chapter 1, was written by the Apostle John when he was in exile on the Greek island of Patmos. Now, Nick Hannett, you may remember, just before Christmas, preached on Revelation chapter 1.

So if you want a refresher, or if you weren't here for that, then do go online and listen to that talk. But for now, I want to give us three introductory points just to help us get our bearings, not only for this morning's talk, but actually for these next seven Sunday mornings.

So three introductory points on Revelation as a whole, and you'll see I put them on the outline on the back of the service sheet. Firstly, Jesus is Lord.

Now, we see that very clearly in chapter 1, verses 12 to 18. They are glorious verses as the Apostle John sees this vision of the risen Jesus.

Let me read them to us again. And as well as following, see if you can also just almost see what's happening with your mind's eye. Chapter 1, verse 12.

[7 : 41] Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

The hairs of his head were like white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

But he laid his right hand on me, saying, Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one I died. And behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades.

Here is an awesome description of the risen, victorious, living Jesus Christ. The one who has all authority over all people for all time.

[8 : 55] So that's the first thing we need to see in terms of getting our bearings. And secondly, is that evil continues to exist, and evil will continue to exist.

Just turn on to Revelation chapter 12. Now the fact that evil continues to exist becomes clearer as we go through the book.

Have a look at Revelation chapter 12, verse 5. Where the church is portrayed as a woman giving birth.

She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was caught up to God and to his throne.

This is none other than the birth of the Lord Jesus himself, the one who will rule the nations. That is then followed by the defeat of Satan, achieved through the death and resurrection of Jesus, just as the Lord Jesus himself had said it would in John chapter 12.

[10 : 05] Now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out. That is then followed in verse 10 by a declaration of God's triumph.

Have a look at verse 10. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

And as a result, verse 17, Satan is furious. Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring.

The rest of her offspring, of course, being the church. On those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

So Jesus Christ is Lord. And evil continues to exist. Which means thirdly, that the church that follows of Jesus Christ will, until Jesus comes at the end of history, find themselves in a spiritual war zone.

[11:17] Just what we saw, isn't it, in Ephesians. In Ephesians chapter 6, a few weeks ago. Because time and time again, of course, in the field of war, you get to the point where although victory is certain, where although in a sense the decisive battle has been won, yet there is a considerable, what might be called mopping up exercise, still to be achieved before peace can finally be established and proclaimed.

So we've just celebrated, haven't we, 75 years since the Normandy landings. And yet it was another 11 months before peace was finally achieved. And declared in Europe.

There was much heavy fighting in the course of those months. The so-called Battle of the Bulge in Belgium in the winter of 1944, 1945, was the largest and bloodiest single battle fought by American forces during World War II.

And it's just the same in the spiritual realm. The battle has been won. Jesus is Lord. That is declared in Revelation chapter 1. And yet evil continues for the time being and will continue until Jesus returns at the end of history.

And therefore the church in every age, wherever the church is, finds itself in the middle of a spiritual war zone. So what is the book of Revelation doing?

[12:44] Well, it's dealing, if you like, and dealing with all the questions which arrives from this apparent discrepancy. The fact that on the one hand, Jesus Christ is Lord and continues to extend his kingdom as the gospel is preached throughout the world.

And on the other hand, that forces of evil continue to exist and even flourish, as we see by the large number of Christians who are persecuted throughout the world.

And the letter to these seven churches, which we're looking at over the summer, chapters 2 and 3, one letter to seven churches, translates, if you like, that huge cosmic spiritual battle into the present existence, the day-to-day reality, the life of local churches.

There are seven churches. It's one of the Bible's numbers of completion, suggesting, I think, that the issues that we see in each of these seven churches, they're typical of the kinds of issues which all churches will face until the Lord Jesus returns.

And today we're simply looking at chapter 2, verses 1 to 7, The Church in Ephesus. And you'll see two headings on the outline. Firstly, The Intolerance That Every Church Needs.

[14:09] Well, it's a slightly provocative title, but hopefully we'll get the point as we go along. Have a look at verses 2 and 3. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are called 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 namesake, and you have not grown weary. I wonder if you remember, those of you who are here, what we learned about Ephesus when we were looking at Ephesians earlier on in the year.

It was known as the metropolis of Asia, possibly the second most important city in the Roman Empire, is the capital of a Roman province. The Apostle Paul had founded the church there 40 years earlier, during which time we read the first anti-Christian riots.

The city was dominated by the mighty temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens.

I don't know if you've been to Athens, if you've seen the Parthenon there on the hill, and it was four times the size. The life of the city revolved around the temple, its political, social, economic, and religious life.

[15:34] In other words, it was a tough place to preach the gospel, to stick resolutely to the truth about Jesus, to resist all attempts to shift the church away from that truth.

The pressure to compromise would have been enormous, although, of course, it would have made life easier and more comfortable to do so. We read in Acts chapter 20, the Apostle Paul's farewell speech to the leaders of the church in Ephesus.

I've put some of, just an excerpt from that speech on the outline. As the Apostle Paul says, pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

And now, it seems, 40 years later, wonderfully, they have heeded the warning. Some, it seems, Revelation chapter 2, verse 2, had indeed come in amongst them, claiming to be part of the wider apostolic circle, to have teaching authority in some way from the Lord Jesus.

[17 : 01] And the church has tested them, tested their teaching, tested their lives, and found them to be false. And what does Jesus say? He commends them because they've taken truth seriously.

Twice, notice, he commends their patient endurance, both in verse 2 and in verse 3. In other words, they haven't given up standing for the truth, persevering in the gospel in the face of a very pagan and very tolerant culture.

In other words, they didn't succumb to the kind of sloppy, well-meaning benevolence which says that it's uncharitable to say, to tell anyone that they're wrong.

there was in them a right hatred of false teaching and evil living. I guess it's another way, isn't it, of really just saying, here is a church that believed the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because of truth, because of course, if truth exists, then untruth exists. There must be boundaries. There are boundaries. It means saying no to things.

[18 : 21] As of course, love always means saying no to things. We've just had our mission partner slot, just hearing about Proclamation Institute Zambia.

Most of our mission partners, you may or may not know this, but most of our mission partners are with the mission agency Crosslinks. Crosslinks was formed in 1922, so they're about to celebrate their 100th anniversary.

Just over 100 years previously, in 1799, its predecessor society, Church Missionary Society, was formed.

So around 20 people all met together in 1799 with the desire to send out men and women across the globe to preach the gospel with the message of Jesus.

William Wilberforce was one of them involved from the start, and he and others, they pushed for these missionaries as they went out across the globe to hold fast to the authority of scripture and to preach the message of the cross.

[19 : 31] Now sadly, 100 years later, by the end of the 19th century, CMS, Church Missionary Society, had hit rocky ground and they had loosened their doctrinal commitments.

Theological liberalism had taken its place and therefore determined that there should be a society which was still committed to proclaiming Christ and preaching the gospel.

A number of those involved in Church Missionary Society left it and they formed in 1922 Crosslinks. They were criticized at the time and yet they demonstrated as the church here in Ephesus demonstrated the intolerance that every church needs.

Now I guess some of us may recoil from this perhaps because of our personalities or perhaps because we think it's not Christian somehow and yet notice for you in verse 6 how the Lord Jesus commends them because they hate the works of the Nicolaitans.

Now we'll see more about them in two weeks' time so I don't want to step on the toes of Tim Townsend who is preaching in two weeks' time but it seems that they want the church to accommodate to the culture to get with the program in the words in the famous words of David Cameron a few years ago when he was Prime Minister.

[21 : 03] But notice verse 6 the Lord Jesus hates it. It's a very strong language isn't it? He hates it when the church changes its beliefs to fit the culture to fit with society and I take it very simply if we love the Lord Jesus then I take it we all love what he loves and I take it that we all hate what he hates and that is entirely appropriate and right and good.

Would that the church today we might say regain this same Ephesian confidence this same seriousness about the truth. It's precisely this lack of discernment that has brought many of the

older denominations in this country to a point of crisis.

Now perhaps you can imagine how tough that was for the church in Ephesus to hold on to the truth. Clearly verses 2 and 3 it led to toil and patient endurance no doubt they took flack from their pagan neighbours no doubt they took flack from perhaps some of their so called Christian neighbours who couldn't really see what all the fuss was about.

No doubt they had to cope with being called intolerant and narrow. Although it's interesting we'll see in just a moment although the Lord Jesus does have a very searching and penetrating criticism of them he never calls them intolerant and narrow.

[22 : 33] Far from it he commends their discernment. Your intolerance he says of falsehood is my intolerance. Which means of course that a church without this kind of intolerance is in fact a very foolish church indeed.

So the intolerance every church needs. Secondly the love that no church can do without. Verses 4 and 5 but I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Remember therefore from where you have fallen repent and do the work you did at first. If not I'll come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

a couple of questions for us question number one I wonder if you've ever seen a redundant church building perhaps you can think of one near your place of work or which you pass frequently all the windows are boarded up the bricks are still there the tiles are on the roof but actually nothing is fulfilling the purpose for which it's been built it's just a redundant church building.

The second question have you seen a redundant church? Different question not a redundant church building but a redundant church I guess the problem is a redundant church might be much harder to spot a redundant church is I take it in all likelihood a congregation gathering Sunday by Sunday saying prayers reading the Bible sermon baptizing singing and so on and yet in the sight of Jesus it's possible to be a church like that yet actually one which isn't really a church at all it is a redundant church now I take it that because that is such a terrible prospect then you and I we need to work out don't we what verse four means what's it mean to have abandoned their first love now one of the things about each of these letters to the seven churches is that they all follow a similar pattern and I think we'll probably get the hang of this over the next few weeks or so so for example each of the churches is commended in various ways most of them at least not all of them but most of them are commended in various ways and then they are censured in various ways not all of them but most of them they all end with a promise but each one starts in a similar way as well they start by echoing part of the description we had of the risen victorious

[25 : 37] Lord Jesus in Revelation chapter one so have a look at Ephesians two verse one to the angel of the church in Ephesus writes the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hands who walks among the seven golden lampstands it's the echo of chapter one verses twelve and thirteen then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest and it seems that with each church that description at the beginning of the section which is addressed to that church the way in which it echoes chapter one is a key to the way in which the church is to move forward in Ephesus it is that the Lord Jesus is the one who stands amongst his people that's how we started our meeting this morning wasn't it by being reminded of that and therefore what does it mean for them to have lost their first love presumably at the very least it means that they have lost their first love for the

Lord Jesus Christ they've lost sight of the fact that here he is standing amongst them and that is therefore why they need to be reminded precisely of this point that he does indeed stand in their midst now I wonder if you can remember for yourself that first love for the Lord Jesus not all of us will be able to but I guess some of us will be able to perhaps the very first time you are really convicted in your heart of the great depth of sin the reality of judgments the great sense of wonder that God should love you the great sense of rejoicing that Jesus died on the cross for your sin or perhaps you've recently seen the enthusiasm of a young Christian who is simply taken up by Jesus love for them and yet the church in Ephesus has lost that first love and presumably they haven't realized it presumably that's why the Lord

Jesus has to tell them presumably the pastor hadn't realized it presumably the church council hadn't realized it presumably the congregation the members hadn't realized it either they have lost their first love and yet I think it's also clear that this lack of love for Jesus in Ephesus also has a particular dimension and that is that they have stopped witnessing to Jesus they have lost their evangelistic

zeal their evangelistic edge again it's the significance of the lamp stands the churches are pictured as lamp stands because they are to shed the light of the gospel across the world it's why I take it in verse 5 the Lord Jesus says he'll remove their lamp stand because it's no longer fit for purpose so their lack of love for Jesus is seen in this lack of witness to those around them proclaiming the gospel no doubt was hazardous in Ephesus no doubt it was regarded as being un-Ephesian un-Roman it was to put you on the edge of the cultural mainstream and so they had stopped doing it well I wonder what the risen

Jesus would say to Grace Church Dulwich I wonder what he'd say to some of us as individuals that we've lost our evangelistic zeal perhaps and yet it's not too late wonderfully so verse 5 remember therefore from where you have fallen repent and do the works you did at first Jesus words of warnings of course are always acts of love they're always acts of grace and yet they do need to repent repentance will always include the fruit of repentance if they don't repent they may still carry on meeting but in the eyes of the Lord Jesus they will no longer be a church if they do repent why there's the wonderful promise of verse 7 of forgiveness and experiencing once again

God's intimate presence verse 7 to the one who conquers I'll grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God well I went on sabbatical two years ago lots of you very kindly asked what I was going to be doing during my sabbatical and I tried to reply that I thought the most important thing a pastor can do on their sabbatical is to make sure to use their sabbatical to make sure they are first and foremost a disciple of Jesus Christ before they are a church pastor it's also easy to rush around doing things and being busy and to lose sight of Jesus but of course it's not just true is it for a church pastor actually it is true for all of us it can be true for an entire church an entire church culture perhaps it is busy busy busy and yet loses sight of the risen

[31 : 39] Jesus in their midst a church with its back to the wall like the church in Ephesus needs more than mere exhortation you see what they are given instead is a reminder that the Lord Jesus is in their midst a church with its back to the wall needs Jesus so let me ask that sabbatical question to us as a congregation what are your ambitions you're immediately thinking I wish I was having a sabbatical but what are your ambitions for the summer not a sabbatical but what are your ambitions for the summer what are you going to say when someone says to you what are you doing for the summer perhaps going on holiday perhaps having some fun perhaps having some me time perhaps having some sunshine time to switch off and all those kinds of things but how about first and foremost a renewed vision of the

Lord Jesus Christ a new appreciation of his presence with us a new love for Jesus a new zeal for the Lord Jesus many of us live very busy lives frankly the most useful thing the most important thing we can do with our summer is to fix our gaze on the Lord Jesus again to be reminded that he dwells with us that he is present with us the intolerance every church needs the love no church can be without now I don't know what the Lord Jesus thinks of Grace Church Dulwich but I cannot help wondering whether this is a very timely letter for us it's a vital reminder isn't it that Jesus doesn't set love against the truth perhaps like me you've heard sloppy talk from some about you know which effectively says well you know there are some churches which are kind of churches which are into truth and there are other churches which are more loving churches and are full of love and by implication the ideal church is some way in the middle not at one extreme not at the other but somehow in the middle that is muddle headed a healthy church needs to be a church which is firmly committed to the truth and which is a church which is full of love for the

Lord Jesus a love which demonstrates itself in its evangelistic zeal witnessing as far as it's able to to the Lord Jesus not giving up in the face of the culture and so on Ephesus is pretty similar we saw this over the course of looking at Ephesians a few months ago it's so similar I think to our context and our culture to stand firm in the midst of it the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand who walks among the seven golden lampstands heavenly father we praise you very much this glorious vision of the risen victorious triumphant Jesus Christ walking amongst his people amongst his churches we thank you that he is present with us today we're sorry heavenly father when we forget his presence when we take his presence for granted thank you for this letter written to these seven churches and we pray heavenly father we would indeed be a church which prizes the truth which holds on to the truth which is discerning and we long to grow in our love for the Lord Jesus we pray for any whose love has grown cold who have abandoned the love that they had at first and we pray heavenly father that over the summer please would you graciously draw them back to yourself and we ask it in Jesus name amen to man