

First Works, First Love

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[0 : 00] Amen. Please turn with me to Revelation, the last book of the Bible, a book of Revelation to the Apostle John.

I'm going to read the first seven verses, this great book concerning the last times and very much focusing on the church, the church of the Lord Jesus.

And as we see, as we're going to see in these next number of weeks, seven churches, seven sermons to consider these churches.

We looked at this about 10, 11 years ago. We're going to re-examine these words to the churches of 2,000 years ago that are very much relevant to us today.

So let's read from the beginning of chapter 2, the first seven verses, 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.

[1 : 07] This is the Lord Jesus. 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 find them to be false.

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

Remember, therefore, from where you had fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I'll 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. May God bless that reading, this holy word, as we consider this vision that John was given to these seven churches, to the first church, the church in Ephesus in eastern Turkey, where John has given these words to this church in Ephesus regarding certainly the church that had lost its first love for the Lord Jesus, and this church being commanded to return to the first love and to do the works that they'd done.

[2 : 50] As we read there in verse 5, works that they'd done at first. First works, first love. These words that were given by the Lord Jesus, the one who knows, who knows you, who knows me, who knows his church, and the one who warns his people, who warns me, warns you, the one who promises, the one who promises with these great promises of victory, these great promises of everlasting life in the, as we read there, in the paradise of God, in the glorious heaven that awaits all who are his.

You know, for over 2,000 years, the church of the Lord Jesus, the church has existed. The church has existed and continues to exist to make Jesus known.

The church has been given this great privilege, this great work to preach the good news of salvation in and through the Lord Jesus Christ and in and through him alone.

The church has been given this great privilege to teach the things of truth and to inform all who hear that the things of truth are found in God's word, God's word, the Bible.

And the church has been given this work to, not just to preach, not just to teach, but to bring, as it were, the balm of healing, healing to the brokenhearted.

[4 : 20] And by God's grace, to seek to show the compassion of the Lord Jesus to others, to bring that compassion, to bring the works of healing to those who are lost, to those who are poor, to those who are on the margins.

And the church will continue in that work of preaching and teaching and healing, bringing the compassion of the Lord Jesus. That's going to happen and continue to happen until the Lord Jesus

returns.

The gospel message, it's the same wherever faithful preaching is given, wherever faithful teaching is offered. It's the same gospel message wherever the word's proclaimed.

Of course, the word is preached all over the world. There are many places where the word is preached. There are many churches.

And of course, when there are many churches, there are many different issues in these many different churches. In the case, for over 2,000 years, even as we see here, even in the examples we're given of these seven different churches, these seven churches in the old province of Asia Minor and as we know now of Eastern Turkey, modern day Turkey.

[5 : 41] And John the Apostle given this vision or these visions of these particular churches, this great revelation, this revealing to these churches. And that vision that John was given was a vision was words to encourage, words to warn, and words to reveal the promises of the Lord Jesus.

And remember when these words were given. These words were given in a time of great persecution of the church. But at the same time, the church had to remain faithful and the church had to be encouraged and to listen to the words of warning, the words of encouragement, and the words of promise that the Lord Jesus gave to his people then as he gives now.

And as we look at these words that were given through this vision, to remember that they're utterly relevant to us today. They were relevant 2,000 years ago.

And they've been relevant for every period of time. And they'll continue to be relevant, as we said, until the Lord Jesus returns. And that's why it's so important to revisit from time to time, to revisit this great vision of these seven churches.

Don't let's, you know, fall into the trap of thinking because a passage has been preached once. That's it. No, we're given these words of God, the word of God, to continue to bring before us to bring before our hearts and minds.

[7 : 09] Don't let's restrict the word to just one particular moment and that's it. So, you know, we will come back as we're doing this evening, coming back to this particular passage of Scripture because, yeah, the word's the same but times do change.

And so we've got to address and readdress, as it were, the word of God to the times that we're living in. And so, well, as I said at the start, we're going to look at each of these churches, one church per evening service to see what God's teaching us, what's God showing us in relation to the church of the Lord Jesus today.

Human nature is the same, human nature is the same as it was 2,000 years ago to today. And, you know, even though there were churches in a particular period of time, churches have the same issues, same issues in principle, same issues then, same issues now.

So, we're going to see the relevance that these visions have for us today, for the church today, and to do honour to God in seeing and exploring the word that God gave through the Lord Jesus, the word to these churches.

What about these visions? What's happening? Well, John, John the disciple, John the apostle, John's been given this vision, or these visions.

[8 : 42] He's an old man now. He was a disciple of Jesus, but many decades later he's been given these visions. He's been given them in a little island, the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

He's been banished to that island prison. He's been faithful to the Lord Jesus, and because of his faithfulness, he's been sent into exile by the authorities. So, in one sense, he's on his own on that island, but of course he's not alone.

God's faithful to John, and God's faithfulness to John God makes known. These wonderful things concerning the Lord Jesus, wonderful things concerning the church, the church through the ages, the whole of the book of Revelation concerns the church and its struggle against evil, against those who are evil, but the visions that tell of the sovereignty of God.

Yes, there's going to be conflict between the Lord's people and those who are opposed to the Lord's church, but the vision of Revelation speaks of the victory. That's the church through the victory of the Lord Jesus.

But then, we look at the first part of this revelation, and we look at the first of these visions. Seven churches, as we said, different aspects to these churches.

[10 : 05] Six of these seven churches are commended for particular aspects of their work. There's actually one church that's not given any commendation, the last church, the church in Laodicea.

But all the churches are given warnings, warnings about the particular aspects to their work. But there is a certain pattern to these seven churches, because in each of the seven churches, the vision begins with Jesus' words that he knows.

Every church begins with the word of Jesus he knows, I know, because Jesus knows each church. He knows the churches there in eastern Turkey.

He knows every church, even this church here. And then after we read of Jesus who knows, we're told, in each of the churches, the verdict that Jesus gives.

[11:07] And then, the word, the last word that Jesus gives to each of these seven churches concerning he who conquers. In other words, he who overcomes, overcomes, overcomes the world.

And this is the word of the Lord to the church in the 21st century as it was to the church in the first century. So let's look at this word. Let's look at this vision. This first vision to the church in Ephesus. What do you know about Ephesus? Well, it's now a ruin. It's a ruined city now. About 2,000 years ago, it was one of the most important cities in that area of Asia Minor, that area of Turkey. In the western, I think I said eastern, the western part of Turkey. It was the capital of that region. It was a great city. It was a city of about 250,000 people. But it was a city where pagan worship was widespread.

There was a famous building there called the Temple of Artemis. So, this great, great temple, one of the wonders of the world at that time. 150 years later, after this letter was written, it was destroyed by the invading gods.

[12:22] But it was a city where, you know, pagan worship predominated. It was a city of so much superstition. It was a city, as we said, of pagan worship. It was a city where crime predominated.

But in that particular city, Paul had planted a church. And from that church, evangelism across that area. And so, John has been given this vision to this church in Ephesus.

This church in the middle of this big, booming seaport. For so much evil is happening, criminal gangs all around. The goddess Artemis has been worshipped.

There's so much sorcery going on. Is there any difference even today in 21st century Scotland? Is there churches existing in the midst of so much superstition?

So many non-Christian practices? We're living in an environment where it is difficult to witness.

Witnessing demands courage. Has it demanded courage for the church there in Ephesus?

[13:33] Because we're not just talking about a church here in West Lothian. It could be the Highlands, it could be the Islands, the Central Belt, the Lowlands, even in the land of Scotland itself.

We're living in pagan and dangerous times. I think I mentioned this before. I remember one of my colleagues some years ago speaking of the city of Edinburgh. It's basically a pagan city.

We are in that environment. environment. But in that environment the church's light has to continue to shine and not be ashamed to shine, to shine in the darkness.

And that's what the church here in Ephesus has been commended for us. We see there in verses 2 and 3 where Jesus says that he knows. As we said for each of the seven churches Jesus begins with the words I know.

Because he's the all-seeing, he's the all-knowing saviour. He knows each and every congregation where his name's proclaimed. He knows you.

[14:34] He knows each one of us. He knows you inside out. And there's nothing that escapes him. Nothing that escapes the knowledge, the all-knowing of our Lord and saviour.

He knows the motives of every congregation. He knows the love or lack of love within each and every congregation. He knows those who are his. He knows those who have yet to give their lives to him.

He knows this church. He knew this church in Ephesus. And he's commending the church there and they're following Jesus and the work for the Lord.

That's what he says to the church in Ephesus. And listen again to the words I know. I know your works. Okay? He says I know your works, your toil, your patient endurance. In verse 3, I know you're enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake.

Let's look at what Jesus is saying there in more detail. I know your works. He knows that the church there in Ephesus is witnessing it. It's revealing their faith and action in that pagan city.

[15:41] He knows that the church is seeking to do the will of God there in that city. So they're being commended for their actions. And he's saying, you know, you in Ephesus, your faith is alive.

He says, I know you're not a dead church. I know that your works prove your faith. I know that your faith is a living faith, an active faith. You know, he's saying, I know your works.

He's not saying, I know your confession. I know you're subscribing to the confession of faith. He's not saying, I know that you're keeping to the doctrines of the church.

No. I mean, a church may have the purest of worship, the purest of sets of beliefs, the purest of confession. But unless a church is showing that faith with works, then the church is failing.

The church faith has to be demonstrated by works. And you know, in the year 2022, there's going to be work done for the Lord in every congregation that proclaims the name of Jesus.

[16:52] that work's going to be different in different parts of the country. Of course it is. But God gives to each church particular work to do and particular works to do.

Yes, the message is the same. The Lord Jesus came from heaven to earth to give his life for sinners. Proclamation's the same. There'll be different aspects to the work to tell others, to show others.

There'll be different works of ministry to the poor and to the lost, to the sick, to the suffering. We still need to proclaim the works that God gives to each of his congregations to proclaim the free offer of the gospel, free offer of salvation in Jesus alone.

And because it's work, it's toil. As we see Jesus sitting there, I know your toil. In other words, I know your hard work. Obviously, that church there in Ephesus was working hard, laboring for the Lord. Because it's hard work that a church is involved in. Every aspect of a church's life, preaching, teaching, ministering, fellowshiping, it's hard work.

[18:07] It's hard work reaching out. It's hard work. But remember, God's word gives that great promise of those who are faithful that your labor, your hard work isn't in vain.

It's not work to somehow gain merit from God. We know that. But surely the work that the Lord gives to his people and the hard work that's endured and the hard work that continues that evidence are people who love the Lord, who love their Savior.

I suppose we're still on holiday at this moment, but being a Christian, there's never a holiday for being a Christian. Christian. We have to say it's 24-7.

Being a Christian is continuous. It's ongoing. And it seems there that the church in Ephesus, they were ongoing in their work. They were committed to working, laboring for the Lord.

What about you? What about me? What about each one of us? We prepared in this year of the Lord, 2022, to labor for the Lord? What is the prospect of hard work?

[19:15] Does that make you wince? Does it make you want to avoid that hard work? Let's be resolved to be workers, workers for the Lord, workers where God sends you, where God places you.

Workers for the glory of his name. So Jesus said, I know, I know. What else does he know? He says, I know your patient endurance.

patience. That endurance and patience. Patience, endurance, keeping, in other words, you're keeping going in faith. Even when you're suffering for the sake of the gospel, you keep going, you endure.

You see beyond even your immediate suffering. You see beyond to the eternal hope that you have in the Lord Jesus. And certainly in the context of the city where these believers were in Ephesus, they needed much endurance.

patience. And much patience. And even for the church today, we're reminded patience. It's not a weakness. It's not a weakness to be patient. Certainly when we're in the growing opposition against the church.

[20:23] But let's be resolved not to go under, not to succumb to the pressures, the intense pressures that so often are given against the church.

Let's practice patient endurance. Yes, there's so much pressure bearing upon the Lord's people, but the more that you remain close to the Lord, you'll know that God is sovereign.

He's not going to permit the evil one to triumph over his people. And he's not going to permit his people to endure suffering beyond what you can bear.

But notice, it's not just hard work, it's not just patient endurance that Jesus knows of that church there in Ephesus.

He says this also, verse 2 and 3, I know you can't bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be true.

[21 : 22] I know, says Jesus, I know that you can't bear with those who are evil. In other words, you're not tolerating wicked people. And it's not the criminal gangs who roamed about Ephesus so much that Jesus is saying of the Ephesians there.

It's those that we see who were in the church, at one point in the church themselves, who claimed to be apostles, but were in fact false teachers, false apostles.

And so the church there in Ephesus has been commended for not tolerating these deceivers. These people that claimed to be apostles, but were in fact nothing of the sort.

The church certainly knew it's those who were his and those who were not. And the church certainly found out that these false teachers were just that, false, giving a false doctrine, false teaching.

2000 years ago, bring it to today. There's still the same deception in the churches, isn't there? But you who are wise, you've been given the wisdom from God, discern, discern, be in your guard against fraud, against deception, even in the church itself, who might claim to speak in the name of the Lord Jesus, but by their words, by their testimony, by their works, seem to be false.

[22 : 57] People who deny the divinity of the Lord Jesus, people who rubbish the gospel of salvation in Christ alone, people who deny original sin, people who deny even the truth of Scripture, that all people are sinners before God, people who say that good is evil and evil good.

Don't ever bear in your heart and mind those who are evil and pretend righteousness. You see it, it's there, it's all before us. I mean, Jesus knows the church there in Ephesus has dealt with these particular people who denied the truth, who are enduring patiently for Jesus' sake.

He's saying, I know you're enduring patiently, bearing up for my name's sake, and you've not grown weary. They've not borne these wicked men, they've not tolerated these wicked people, but they're commended for bearing up, because no church that proclaims the name of Jesus can bear wicked men, but the same church will bear up under pressure, and will do so to maintain the truth.

What about you? Are you bearing up as a believer? Are you bearing up in your faith as you're witnessing to the Lord where the Lord sends you, where the Lord places you, in your home, in your work environment, in the various circumstances that God gives you?

I'm not promised an easy road to heaven. The path is narrow, rough, but as Jesus says to the church there in Ephesus, I know you're enduring patiently, you're bearing up for my name's sake, and you've not grown weary.

[24 : 47] You're promised that strength to continue in that narrow road. As we're thinking this morning, that journey, that heavenward journey that the Lord's people are on. And when you're bearing up, yes, the Lord's pleased with his church, the one who knows, but at the same time, the one who knows is the one who warns.

It would be wonderful, wouldn't it, if the words to the church in Ephesus stopped at the end of verse 3, or the commendation that God gives the church there in Ephesus, but the Lord had further words to say to that church, yet, I hold this against you.

You know, these believers in Ephesus, they've been working hard for the Lord, and yet, in that vision that John was given to convey to the church there, Jesus tells that church that their work isn't sufficient, because, we're told, verse 4, that they'd forsaken their first love.

Let this live against you. You've abandoned the love that you had at first. This is a church that had been commended for its hard work. This is a church that endured in the face of so much opposition against it.

This is a church that's warned because they'd lost, they'd abandoned their first love, because love had been absent from the works that the church there had been doing.

[26 : 18] Yes, this is the same church that had been founded by Paul, the same church that knew the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is a church that we read elsewhere in Acts, a church in Ephesus that grew in power.

The church grew there in Ephesus, and yet, this is a church that had abandoned its first love. It was that love that was there when Paul founded that church these many decades before.

What about you? What about me? What about the first love that you had when you became a Christian? You were converted. Is that love still there? Well, Jesus telling the church there that they'd fallen from a great height, they'd abandoned that first love, that all-encompassing love for the Saviour.

They'd been working hard, but without love. the works were empty. And this is, you know, really, this is a warning to each one of us.

It's a warning for each and every one of us to look to the works that we're doing for our Lord and Saviour. Ask yourself, have I abandoned my first love?

[27 : 31] Have I abandoned that joy I had when I first became a Christian? Have I abandoned that zeal that I had when I wanted to tell my family, my friends, my neighbours, my colleagues of the Saviour who first gave his life for me?

Have you forgotten that time when you went down on your knees and you asked Jesus to be your Saviour? That time when your heart was aglow for the Saviour? When you first became a Christian, you were on fire for the Lord.

But then the years rolled on. That fire doesn't burn quite so much as it did then. Maybe your love's even for the Saviour just a shadow of what it once was.

Still there, just flickering from before it was a flame. How can you get back to that first love that you once had? Jesus tells the church there in Ephesus as he tells us.

He says, repent. He says, turn back to Christ. Seek forgiveness. See that in verse 5. Remember, therefore, because they abandoned their first love, therefore, remember, from where you've fallen, repent and do the works that you did at first.

[28 : 47] In other words, get back to the beginning. Get back even to that day, that moment when you were converted. Repent your heart right with God. That's what the church there in Ephesus was being commanded to do, to repent.

Otherwise, as Jesus says, otherwise, there's going to be a consequence. Repent. Jesus says, unless you repent, I'll come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

In other words, unless that church repents from abandoning its first love, Jesus is going to take the witness of that church away from that city.

The church will be no more. forever. And that's what happened. That's what happened in Ephesus. As we said, there's no city in Ephesus.

There's no church in Ephesus. In 1308, to be precise, Turkish invaders invaded Ephesus. The city was destroyed, the church destroyed.

[29 : 55] Let's never be complacent. You look around even Scotland today, even churches, even in Edinburgh. Go to Edinburgh, see the number of churches there that are no longer church buildings where worship happens.

You see all these empty churches that are now one thing and another. That's a tragedy. The tragedy that in many ways an empty church is a barometer of a nation's spirituality.

The famine of the Wartner land. A land that's abandoned, walking with the Lord. Even the church that's abandoned, it's first love.

And pray that God, the Lord, that he'll keep the lampstand here even in this very church, this very building. And that lampstand will never be removed from this church that's witnessed over these decades.

And pray too for discernment. Discernment against these false teachers we were thinking of even earlier. But now come to more precision.

[31 : 01] Verse 6, Yet this I have, this you have rather. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Never heard that word Nicolaitans other than here in this part of Revelation.

And the word would suggest that these were people that followed an individual called Nicholas. He followed this man, certainly this man's teaching, rather than following the Lord Jesus.

The believers there, they hated that teaching. Just as the believers through the ages have to hate the teaching of those who present a false gospel.

And the false gospel is there around us. You hear it in television, the false gospel of prosperity, become a Christian and all your money travels over and you'll be prosperous. or the morality preaching, for there's nothing of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus.

And even in the context of individuals, even in the broader church, the wider church, avoid anything and anyone who focuses on self rather than the Lord Jesus.

[32 : 16] The one who knows, the one who warns, and finally, the one who promises. Look at verse 7 and 8 where we read, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

In other words, pay attention, pay attention to what Jesus has said and will say to these churches. Listen, be encouraged in your work and your hard work, be encouraged in your discernment and your wisdom, but listen to what Jesus says about abandoning our first love.

But there's a promise that Jesus finishes with and as we'll see in each of the seven churches, to the one who conquers, I'll grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

To the one who conquers, in other words, the one who overcomes, the one who overcomes the world, the one who overcomes the evil one, the one who knows that victory over sin, the one who has that promise of eternal life, heaven, and then in the new heaven, the new earth.

You've got that promise of eternity, as we see here in the paradise of God, and in the glorious perfection when the believer enters the glory of heaven, and that further perfection when the Lord Jesus returns and brings in the new heaven and the new earth.

[33 : 46] We're told there you'll never, well, the words of verse 8, I'll grant you eat of the tree of life. In other words, that you'll know that full nourishment in the paradise of God, the tree of life that speaks of, well, that speaks of eternal life, that life that's found in God alone.

When you, as we were thinking this morning, cross that finishing line, when you cross that line from heaven, from earth to heaven, all the hardships that you endured in life, be gone.

You'll have that hope, that true hope realized. You've got that hope now. As we were singing just in the previous psalm, there'll be no more tears. You'll be with Christ forever.

So bring, take that promise with you into this new year, that you who know the Lord Jesus, you're amongst those who have conquered, you've overcome the evil one.

You've done it through faith in the Lord Jesus. And that heavenward's journey that you're on, go forward in faith. Be encouraged by God's word.

[34 : 57] Yes, be warned in that heavenly journey that you're on. But take heart, take heart to know that the Lord is with you. He's with you always.

He's with you. And will continue to be with you until you reach that paradise of God where you'll feast, where you'll eat of the tree of life, where you'll know eternal life and the glory of the paradise of God.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Even though