

Ephesus

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[0 : 00] Let us turn to the passage we read in the book of Revelation, chapter 2, and reading at verse 1.

Revelation chapter 2, and I want to consider with you the first seven verses, the message of Christ to the church at Ephesus.

And I should like tonight to begin with you a series of studies on the letters of our Lord to the churches in Asia, which messages we have in the chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation.

Now let me very briefly try and set the messages in their particular context.

This book, as you know, and as it is titled, was a revelation of the risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ given to the apostle John while he was in exile in the Isle of Patmos.

[1 : 24] And the book is really an encouragement to all persecuted Christians, as they then were, coming up towards the end of the first century.

And to encourage them, the Lord reveals himself in all his glory as the ascended, reigning Lord Jesus Christ, who has a glorious purpose for his persecuted church.

And a part of the vision was given to encourage and to counsel the seven churches which are mentioned in verse 11 of the first chapter.

Now rather than consider them as individual congregations, it is better to think of them as areas or regions of the Asia, now known as Western Turkey, it is better to consider them as areas or regions in which the gospel of Christ was preached and in which Christian churches were established.

And as you read through chapters 2 and 3, you will discover that the conditions in each area varied greatly. For example, in Smyrna and Philadelphia, there was nothing present that drew censure from our Lord.

[3 : 20] In Pergamos, Thyatira and the one before us, Ephesus, there were things to be commended and things to be censured or condemned in each church.

Whereas in Sardis and Laodicea, there was nothing present but what required severe rebuke and censure. And you will also discover, I hope, that as we look at these various churches, these various areas, that when a message is sent to them from the risen Lord, the message is prefixed by a special characteristic of our Lord himself.

And each characteristic of our Lord, the way in which he is presented, for example, as the one who walks in the candlesticks and holds the seven stars, each characteristic or portrayal of the risen Lord is adapted to meet the condition of the church to which he sends a message.

Or put it another way, there is an inseparable connection between what we will continue to refer to as the self-designation of our Lord and the condition of the church to which he sends the message.

Another thing you will note is this, that each letter refers to our Lord's knowledge of the strengths and the weaknesses of the churches.

[5 : 02] Now, I mentioned to you that they were in the area which is called Asia, which we today know as Western Turkey. Now, that area was one of hallowed biblical memories.

It is commonly believed that it is in that area that Mount Ararat is found, that it's that area rather than the ark, Moses' ark rested on top of Mount Ararat.

And as I see, it was in that area that there was a great revival of religion during Paul's second and third missionary journeys.

And the one area, the area to which this letter is addressed, is the one we turned tonight, that of Ephesus. Now, Ephesus was the leading city of the province.

It was a very wealthy city, famous for many things, but particularly famous because of its idolatry and its worship of the goddess Diana.

[6 : 19] You will remember that during Paul's second missionary journey, that he preached there and stayed there for two years. And it was during that period, at the beginning of it, that that tremendous commotion, upheaval took place in the city.

There was a riot in the city. It was a kind of situation where today, riot police would have been sent in with tear gas. In that day, there was a riot.

And the riot was because so many people were converted from idolatry to Christianity, that the silversmiths were losing their trade. Their trade was concerned with producing miniature figures and no doubt plaques and plates of Diana, which people bought.

And it was a pretty lucrative and prosperous industry. It was a... They were upset because of the preaching of Paul and the way in which so many people turned from idolatry to Christianity.

And it was in that city that Apollos preached with burning zeal. It was in that area that Timothy was settled as a minister. It was in that area that the Apostle John was also settled.

[7 : 41] It was from that area that he was banished into exile in the Isle of Patmos. So you see, it was an area in which the Christian church had been well established towards the end of the first century.

And having a particularly thriving Christian community. The Lord addressed this letter to them.

You could almost think of it in terms maybe of our own situation where if you were to take the island of Lewis and compare and contrast it with most, if not all, of the regions of the land today, you would find us, and this is a self-evident fact, of course, that the Christian religion is stronger here than it is in many other areas.

Well, Ephesus was that kind of area. It had that kind of history. The gospel had been planted there. The church had grown. It had spread. It had a history.

And to it, our Lord sends this letter. And I hope that as we look at this and at succeeding letters in the weeks to come, I hope that we will find this study relevant for our own particular situation, both as individuals and as a community.

[9 : 08] Let us look then here tonight briefly at five or six points that we have here. First of all, Christ's self-designation, verses one and two.

These things saith he, and listen to the way he is described. He who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, I know thy works.

Now, there are several things there that we're told about our Lord in his relation to his church. Now, the church is brought before us in symbol.

The symbol, of course, is the candlestick. Now, you know that in the Bible, and you ought to have no difficulty whatsoever in interpreting these things if you knew your Bible.

The candlestick is always the symbol in the Bible for the church of God in the world. And by the church, we mean this. All those, whoever they may be or wherever they may be, who have been called by his grace from the service of sin to the service of Christ and who live in submission to his authority in the world.

[10 : 25] That is the church, not a building, but men and women, boys and girls who gather together in the name of Christ to worship him and to glory in the grace that has saved them from the service and from the power of sin.

Now, that is the church. And here, it is pictured as a candlestick. And the purpose of the candlestick, of course, was to hold forth light. It was to lighten the building, just as these lights here tonight.

Lighten this building. So the candlestick in the temple and the tabernacle lit the building. It held forth the light.

And that is the purpose of the church in the world. It is the light-bearer or the torch-bearer of the truth of God in the world.

That is its primary function. A Christian, says Jesus, is a witness. Ye are my witnesses. The Christian testifies to the truth.

[11 : 34] The professing church in pulpit and in pew testifies to the truth. It holds forth the truth. It proclaims the truth.

It organizes itself in accordance with the truth. And it lives in dependence upon the truth. And it teaches the truth. So that everybody ought to know what the church believes in.

And what the church believes in is the word of God given to her by the Lord himself. That is its mission in the world. And it's spoken of as a golden candlestick.

You see, gold speaks to us always of something which is supremely precious. And this is the organisation which is particularly precious to God in the world.

There are many organisations. There are many clubs. There's the... We have today the European community. We have NATO. We have the...

[12 : 38] We have a League of Nations. So many organisations. Together with them we have the church as an organisation. Not the free church but the church of Jesus Christ as it expresses itself no doubt in its various branches of which the free church is one.

But it is an organisation in the world. The whole church. All who love the Lord Jesus. And that church is particularly precious to him. It is also particularly precious to all those who belong to it.

Thy saints take pleasure in her stones. Her very dust to them is dear. And it was this relationship to the church that we sang that David was speaking of that we sang of there in Psalm 137.

I could never forget thee Jerusalem. Skill part of my right hand if I should ever forget thee. And if you are a member if you love the Lord Jesus I'll tell you something else that you love you love the church of which he is head.

Well no. That's the first thing we have here. And then he sends a message to the angel of the church. And he is pictured Jesus pictured as holding the seven stars in his right hand.

[13 : 54] You see there were seven churches and there were seven stars or seven angels. The word angel and star these words are synonymous. They mean the same thing.

Messengers. Now what it means is this. These were the men to whom was delegated authority by Jesus to lead the church.

They were there sent by. You notice this. they were in his hand. They were his. And they were commissioned by him. And they were where they were because he had sent them.

And they ruled the church. But as they ruled the church they served him. They didn't rule as despots or as autocrats. They were his servants as they exercised rule in the church.

And this is the way it is with all the office bearers in the church. Ministers, teaching elders, ruling elders, deacons, men who are ordained to positions of authority.

[15:00] They are there because he, the Lord, has placed them there. But they are there to rule in his name and for him and they are accountable to him. They are his servants even as they rule in the church.

And then the message comes to these rulers in the church from him of whom it is said that he walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.

Now this again is something which you have written large in the word of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ is invisible. We don't see him. I've never seen him.

And I'm sure you haven't. Unless you had a vision like John had in Papas. But though he is invisible he is not absent. He is present in the church.

Present in the church by his spirit and by his word. He is here taking care. He is with all his people. Taking care of them. Controlling them.

[16:02] Encouraging them. Helping them. Defending them. Supporting them. And as we shall see here also if need be warning them. He is in their midst.

You see, you cannot go anywhere without him being there. He is omnipresent. But he is particularly present in the gatherings of his people.

This is again the great teaching of the word of God. And he is here tonight. You may not be aware of it and I may not be aware of it. But it's a fact that the Lord is present in this building tonight.

And that is why from time to time in a church gathering such as this the Lord speaks to people. He warns them. He encourages them. He challenges them.

He counsels them. He approves of what you're doing or what you're thinking. Or he may disapprove of what you're doing or thinking. He may commend you. Or he may condemn you.

[17:08] Or he may do both. He is present to do that. And notice his presence is an observing one. I walk in the midst of the golden candlesticks and I know thy works.

You see as I mentioned he is omniscient. He is omnipresent and he is omniscient. That is he is present and he knows everything.

He knows every person here tonight. He knows every thought that wells up in your mind. And the Bible even tells us this. That he knows your thought before you can know it yourself.

He sees your thought afar off. And he knows what you're up to. I know your works. I know what you're doing.

And I know why you're doing these things. I know what you're not doing. And I know why you are not doing these things. I know every feeling in everything that you do.

[18:18] He says I know every emotion. I know your fears and your aims and your desires. I know your problems and I know your difficulties. And I know your temptations.

I know their nature and I know their variety. I know where you're strong and I know where you're weak. I know everything about you he says.

And he says that of you and he says it of me as individuals and he says it of us as a church collectively. So you see the presence of Jesus in the church is something which is encouragingly wonderful and also awesomely near.

He is a watchful observer and it may be that as he watches you he may need to chastise you and he may need to warn you. And I said as I said last Sabbath morning in connection with the passage I preached on there in Hebrews chapter 12 verse 5 onwards you remember this that the warning and the chastisement and the challenges of God to your heart through the word are evidences of his love for you.

Evidence that he has not forsaken you and evidence that he has not abandoned you. I would far rather have God speak to me even in words of warning than for God to be silent in my life.

[19 : 50] I would far rather be a member of the church of Ephesus than be someone like Pilate someone like Herod or Caiaphas to whom the Lord uttered not a word.

Well now that is his self designation. Secondly notice his commendation of this church in verses 2 and 3. What did he know about this people? Well he says I know your labour and your patience I know you can't bear with them which are evil I know you've tried them which say they are positive or not and have found them liars I know that you've borne and that you've borne patiently I know that for my name's sake you've laboured and you haven't fainted I know that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans verse 6 which I also hate.

Now what kind of church was this? Well it's obvious that this was a very discerning church. This was a church which knew it's it knew its teachings it knew its doctrines it knew its Bible you know unfortunately there are some Christians who don't know the teachings of the Bible too well they don't know the doctrines all that well at all.

If you ask them what's justification or sanctification or atonement or reconciliation or even redemption incarnation they would have great difficult explaining these terms to you and Christians should have no difficult explaining these terms we ought to know our Bibles we ought to know the truth we ought to know what is right and what is wrong and so on we ought to know light from darkness truth from error we ought to and the Lord commends this church for knowing her beliefs but he commends for more than that he commends for defending them commends for upholding the truth for being loyal to the truth for being zealous for being intolerant of error you know that I must say for myself that I have no qualms whatsoever in saying that every

Christian should have the spirit of intolerance he should be intolerant of error intolerant of attempts to overthrow the truth listen to verse 6 you hate he says the deeds of the Nicolaitans which things I also hate the Lord was intolerant of the attempts of the Nicolaitans to infiltrate the Christian church efforts who were these people well we don't know all that much about them we'll come across them later on we don't know very much about them but what we do know about them is this that they tried to bring into the Christian church practices of immorality you see in that area an area which was known for its idolatry there were practices associated with idolatry which were immoral and these Nicolaitans were teaching the Christians in Ephesus that they could participate in these practices and still retain the name of Christian and there were in the majority the people in Ephesus couldn't stand that teaching they had no touch with that kind of teaching they hated it suggesting that a

[23 : 37] Christian could compromise his Christian profession by indulging in things which were manifestly non-Christian now I say this to you in all sincerity I know that there are areas of doubt for people there are shades of black and white there are shades of grey grey rather I know that there are areas such as that for every Christian in question which has to grapple with should I or should I not but I also know this that any Christian with a Bible in his hand will know that there are clearly defined lines of demarcation for him in what is Christian and non-Christian what is moral and immoral what is right and what is wrong what is truth and what is error what Christ hates and what Christ loves you make no mistake about it and the day you cross these lines you are in grave grave danger as a matter of fact the nearer you go and the oftener you go into the grey areas the more in danger you are as a

Christian and one of these days don't be one bit surprised if you trip over the wire and you're in an area where you ought not to be and I would say this to you again oh forgive me for saying it but again I would say it to you I'll tell you the safest course of action for you as a Christian to adopt distance yourself from what is questionable and you will never ever regret it and I would rather take my stand there than anywhere else now these Ephesian Christians they were really contending for the truth and they were finding it difficult that's what he means when he says I know your works and your labour and your patience I know how you have borne as patience for my name's sake and you haven't fainted I say this to you it isn't easy to be a

Christian and one of the reasons why so many people go into the grey areas and even cave in and go into the black areas is because they don't want to put up with the fight and the struggle and the difficulty of being a Christian and I know don't you run away with the idea that those of us who counsel you to be a steadfast in the faith are people who have never had to contend with these things a lot of people tend to forget that a Christian is someone who has been rescued from the service of sin to the service of Christ and who knows the difficulty of battling on and not caving in and not giving in and seeing even to bring it to our own area here you know that the professing Christian church which fights tooth and nail in the face of all the opposition against the attempts that are made to for example to desecrate the

Lord's day and to overthrow an order which we have had for generations and which we want to retain when the church fights for these things it isn't easy it is ridiculed it is vilified it is held up to exposure by those people who make it who think nothing of laughing at the church and laughing at the Lord and laughing at the word of God that's what they live on and I tell you it isn't easy to fight and fight and battle on in the face of all that opposition but this is what Jesus says to the church of Ephesus oh I know your works and I know what you've had to put up with and I know that you've had to contend for the truth and I know that you've defended the truth in the face of all that opposition and I commend you for your patience and for your endurance and for refusing to give in to error wherever you come across it how many of us would receive that commendation from the

Lord tonight how far are you prepared to go in the defense of the truth and of the faith and of what is right but that leads us on to consider our Lord's condemnation of this church but he says in verse 4 nevertheless I have somewhat against thee thou hast left thy first love remember therefore from whence thou art fallen repent works or else I will come unto thee quickly and remove thy candlestick go to this place except thou repent well a very simple message here condemnation I want you just for a minute tonight I hope I'm not tiring you just to give me your ear for a minute while we try to grapple with this what does this mean I have something against you you have left your first love and you know this is an awful condemnation now notice this the church was commended for a steadfast adherence to the faith but at the same time she had left her first love love what does the first love mean

[29 : 43] I don't see why we should make these things more difficult than they are we all know what it is to love and we all know what it is I'm sure to love for the first time and there are saints in which I remember once a minister leaving his congregation first congregation in Glasgow and the night of his presentation a very moving occasion he stood up and he said you know I can never forget you because no one will ever forget his first love that was his first congregation and he was leaving them and you could never forget that there are a sense which you never I suppose forget your first love what is it what is so special about a first love well I won't say anything that you wouldn't say yourself well for a start you're so full of the person that you love you think about the person all the time you can hardly think of anything else you see the person wherever you go and whatever you're doing you're full of warmth for that person and full of zeal and full of endeavour and you cannot do too much for that person and your affections are caught up for that person now my friend it's the same at the spiritual level when you love the

Lord Jesus for the first time nothing matters but the Lord the Lord as Thomas Chalmers said of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ remember what he said of it the expulsive power of a new affection Christ comes in so many other things go out all things are passed away behold all things are become new someone spoke of us the melting of a fervent heart the expression of a grateful spirit the wonder of it all that he should love me and I should love him that you are caught up with this person of all persons the fervency of it all the desire to be together to be in one another's company the going out of your affections constantly to that individual it's the same with a

Christian and his Lord all the newness and the wonder of it the fragrance of it the zeal the devotion your mind is taken up now what happened to this church she was still zealous for the truth but she had lost the zeal of her love the warmth and the affection of her love I often wonder if this may be ourselves on the island of Lewis at times so zealous for the truth as we ought to be and God forbid that we should be anything else but what about our love for one another our love for the Lord our love for the lost our communion with Christ and prayer for the salvation of souls I would decide that others would come and see what we have seen and feel what we have felt the spontaneity and the enthusiasm and the devotion of it all

I know full well that there's an easy answer that some people say to this you've lost your first love yes I know but well I've left some of these foolish things behind I've left the folly of my spiritual youth behind I've advanced I've developed ah yes my friend I don't doubt that you developed but I wonder if you've developed in your love have you advanced in your love does love cease to be enthusiastic does love cease to be devotional does love cease in its ardor in its desire oh no love develops along these channels and this is the message of the Lord to the church the message of a wounded friend I have something against you is there a message here for you tonight as an individual is there a message here for us as a congregation as a church in this community have we lost our first love have we left him the object of our love oh remember this it is quite possible to keep reading your bible quite possibly keep coming to church quite possible to go through all the motions and all the outer forms of devotional activity and yet to have lost left him somewhere behind and this is the message that he gives to her this is now his counsel remember he says therefore from whence thou what fallen repent and do the first works remember the then is contrasted with the now the past and the present remember what you were but consider now what you are and here is something that the bible always commends to us all the benefit of self recollection don't forget the benefits bestowed upon you the lord supper this do in remembrance of me remember it's a wonderful exercise in the mind of an individual and I want you for a minute tonight to engage in this exercise mentally no one is going to know what's passing through your mind just know but yourself not a soul in this church knows it but yourself you cannot you don't need to tell anyone what you're thinking about as I try to bring you through these words remember from whence thou art fallen remember your past experiences remember all these divine mercies and all these lost joys now in your life remember remember all these promises that you made do you remember all these vows that you took upon yourself do you remember how useful you were at one time do do you remember these things a past usefulness get hold of these departed joys in your devotion and in your service get back your lost appetite for the things of

God ask yourself where did I lose these things and why did I lose these things remember from whence thou art fallen you are not what you were I'm sure there's a message to everyone here tonight unless you are in the fresh joys of Christian commitment to Christ but I wouldn't be surprised if there are some here 10 20 30 40 50 years ago who would love to get back to where they were well you remember where you were and he says repent what does that mean does that mean I've got to go down to my knees and say Lord I'm sorry oh no my friend repentance is far more than that it's far deeper repentance is saying not just saying

[38 : 30] I'm sorry Lord but as I've quoted often Al Martin the great American evangelist say your repentance repentance he says is being so sorry that you break with your sin that you make the break with that which has caused the desolation and the devastation in your life break with it whatever has caused it be it inconsistency be it self indulgence be it as it very often is be it worldliness so often taken up with other things be it spiritual pride oh yes it could even be that I often think that it may very well be that with those cells at times we believe the truth and we have the truth and we contend for the truth and we become complacent and proud and we lose sight of the one whom we love and we lose the ardor and the zeal of it we become lukewarm sometimes we become despondent well whatever happened and wherever it happened if we have become a stranger now to his presence and to his power oh my friend repent get rid of whatever has caused that in your life whatever it may be and you know you will forgive me

I'm sure for saying this but I'm going to confide you know from time to time I say that ministers ought to confide in their congregation for the past few weeks my mind has been directed to make this study with you on sabbath evenings and yet the nearer I was getting to come out to church tonight in the course of this week the less inclined I was to begin these studies because I felt that they weren't really suitable for a sabbath evening and even this afternoon I said it that I didn't think I could do these studies because I was afraid it wouldn't lend itself to this kind of congregation and yet I realise that as the study unfolds tonight you have been given an ear not for what I'm saying but for what the

Lord has said and I'm convinced that there's a message here for someone this evening and I wouldn't like to think that anyone present would put himself outside the circle of those for whom it is a message I think it's a message for us all repent and get back and get back to your first work get back to the beginning get back to the simplicity and to the earnestness of your early days oh I know I know that there are many things in the beginning of a Christian's life that he doesn't need to do you and I have props which we need along the way and the Lord removes them bit by bit by bit but my friend you will never outgrow the need to love more and more and more and more get back to basics back to the beginning you know

I think it was was it William J or it might have been one of the bonners who said this is almost like saying to an apprentice joiner look at the end of his apprenticeship look here now go back and do the first thing you ever did when you began your trade it's like saying to a pupil in school at the end of fifth year look at the end of his of his maths the end of his session look you go back and do that equation you did the very first week of term in August go back and do it maybe that's what you and I need tonight in a relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ go right back to the place where you lost what you had I don't know what that is with you you know it and I hope I know it with myself and finally Christ's warning there might be something

I should have said about that about going back and doing the first works like the joiner and the pupil it wouldn't be easy for them to go right back all the way and to get that kind of work again of course it isn't repentance is never easy going back is never easy to take up the cuddles once more but you have no option if you have stopped loving the Lord you know when two people love one another the course of true love never runs smoothly they say and from time to time there may be ripples on the water I'm sure that even in your own relationship wonderful though it may be there have been ripples from time to time well when these things happen you've got to go back to what caused it and put it right there otherwise there'll never be a reconciliation it'll just be a papering over the cracks well my friend you go back or else he says and this is the final point or else

[44 : 31] I will come to you quickly and remove the candlestick remove thy candlestick out of his place except thou repent now I won't I just close here just in a word this is what it means the candlestick remember is the church the church witnesses to the grace and to the power and truth of Christ individually and collectively and what the Lord is saying here is this if you don't do what I tell you and what you need to be done what needs to be done if you don't do it I will take away my testimony I will take away my church now there are some of you here tonight who may have been to west turkey there were very strong christian congregations there all these seven churches thriving christian community in ephesus and ephesus refused to repent what's happened today in west turkey you'll find very very few christians and very very few established christian churches you'll find a land of millions of people 99% of which is muslim and the walls which used to ring to the praises of the lord jesus christ now ring to the glory of muhammad that's what happened in ephesus why because the church refused to repent what happens at an individual level if a person refuses to come to jesus christ christ leaves him or her if a christian refuses to come back from a path of backsliding what happens christ gives him and her up it may very well be that a person could go so far in departing from christ that he would almost want that to happen something to happen which will mean that he will no longer be obligated to christ or to the church of jesus christ well my friend you pray as you've never prayed in your life that that will never happen to you we pride ourselves on the fact that the church in lewis is so strong very much for the lord to take his candlestick away to take the witness of the church away from this area oh it's happened in other areas in scotland and in other areas of the world where there was a thriving christian community today there's nothing and coming back to the individual level see what happens to you the throb of christian endeavor and christian love and if you don't get back to where you were the silence of the grave will settle over your soul and just as the lord can remove his witness from a community so my friend he can remove the witness of his grace from your heart repent or else that's what will happen but he doesn't leave her without a word of encouragement if you overcome if you continue to battle and to conquer if you overcome in the struggle

I will give you to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God notice the symbol again the tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God I think this is a reference to what happened in the garden of Eden what happened well the woman gave the man the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and he fell he lost all that he had here is the exact opposite if you come back to me I will feed you with something that will restore you to the fullness of life the woman gave Adam the fruit and he fell God promises us the fruit of the tree of life God promises salvation grace in Christ and we are restored where to the very midst of the paradise of

God are you tonight my friend on the outer circle of the church of Jesus Christ well if you repent and if you come back God can bring you right into the middle where he is himself and that's the warmest place of all that's where love flourishes where Christ is you come there and you will never regret it let us pray bless to us the word of thy grace may we know its power operating in our lives to the glory of thy name and the praise to be thine forever in him amen amen oh okay you I they

I asked you My Yum These