



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### To the Church in Ephesus

#### Revelation 2:1-7

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The first church to which John is instructed to write is the church in Ephesus. John's attention must have been captured when he heard Jesus say that name. According to tradition, John was for many years the bishop of the church in Ephesus.

If you were to travel to Ephesus today you'd find only a ruin—an impressive ruin, but nevertheless, just a ruin. In John's day it was already an ancient city and the most important in the province of Asia. It was a hub of trade, culture, and politics situated on an important harbour. Ephesus *now* sits about six kilometres inland. Deforestation and agricultural activities led to the silting up of the harbour. The harbour was dredged repeatedly in ancient times. But there was no stopping the inevitable and as the seaport declined, Ephesus shrank into a small village and, by the Fifteenth Century, ceased to exist entirely.

But in the First Century, Ephesus was a bustling city with as many as a quarter million people—one of the largest cities in the world and *the* largest in Asia. From the busy port, Harbour Street made its way through the city, ending at an impressive theatre. Along the way a traveller would pass the public library, the gymnasium, bathhouses, the market, and the public brothel. But Ephesus' real claim to fame was its Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world. The local form of Artemis was a fertility goddess and protectress of the city. Her statue was kept decorated with symbols of fertility and on her head she wore a mural crown,

representing her guardianship of the city walls. We don't know much about the specifics of her cult in Ephesus, but it's safe to assume it involved all the usual perversions associated with fertility cults in the ancient world. Ephesus was a city of art and science and commerce, but it was also a city of idolatry and witchcraft and perversion—all done in the open. Christianity has had such a sanctifying influence on Western Civilisation that even knowing the perversions of our own decadent, post-Christian era, it's very difficult for us to really understand what life was like in the pagan world of the Greeks and Romans. But there, in the midst of that idolatry and perversion, holding high the light of Jesus in the surrounding darkness, was a church.

And Jesus speaks to the Christians in Ephesus. Look at Revelation 2:1.

**“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.**

We don't know how large the church in Ephesus was at this time, but however large it may have been, these people were a tiny minority living in a morass of paganism. Even without overt persecution, in standing for Jesus, they stood in opposition to everything around them. And so Jesus reminds them from the outset: “I'm the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and I'm the one who walks in the midst of the lampstands.” We saw this imagery in last Sunday's passage from Chapter 1. The lampstands represent these seven churches and the stars their “angels”. There are differing ideas on what exactly is meant by “angels”, possibly heavenly beings with some kind of oversight of the churches, but more likely they're the presbyters or bishops of these churches. And Jesus begins by reminding them that he holds them in his hands. He sustains the “angels” and, like the high priest tending the lampstand in the tabernacle, he stands

in the midst of the churches and tends to them that their light not go out. It's an image of reassurance. These brothers and sisters have been called to be light in the darkness and Jesus reminds them that they do not do so alone and that they do not do so on their own power. He sustains them.

Do you remember what I said last Sunday? Revelation is about three things. It's about tribulation and it's about kingdom and it's about perseverance. On account of the testimony of Jesus, on account of the good news that he is Lord, the Church will face tribulation. The gods and kings of this present age will oppose the Lordship of Jesus and the spread of his kingdom. But Revelation also assures the Church that the kingdom is now. By his death, resurrection, and ascension Jesus has inaugurated his kingdom and he will reign until he has put every enemy under his feet, which means his people can face tribulation with faith and hope. That also means that Jesus expects his people to persevere. We do not walk an easy path, but we know where we're headed and he assures us that he walks the path with us. Jesus' words remind us of the Lord's promise to Israel in Leviticus 26:11-12:

**I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.**

He who has died to make us his own will not abandon us to the darkness. He who has called us make disciples of the nations will surely prosper our work.

Now, having reminded them that he is the one who sustains them, Jesus moves on to the heart of his message for the Ephesians. Look at verses 2-7.

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

Jesus gives them great praise coupled with a serious rebuke. On the positive side, he praises these saints for toil and their patient endurance. If we look at the Greek words that Jesus uses we get a deeper sense of what he's getting at. The toil he's talking about is the sort of toil that wears one to the bone, the sort of blood-sweat-and-tears toil that leaves you ready to drop to the ground when it's over. We don't know the specific details of their situation, but to follow Jesus has truly cost the Ephesians and Jesus knows it. Second, they've not only toiled long and hard, but they've patiently endured. This isn't a hide-until-it's-over kind of patience. This is a stand-your-ground-and-defend-the-walls-until-the-reinforcements-arrive kind of endurance. This is the endurance of people who fight an awful battle, confident of the outcome. Christ has died. Christ is risen. And because of both of those truths, they knew that Christ will come again and they lived and fought and ministered and preached accordingly.

Jesus does mention two specific things that have been part of the Ephesians' battle. First, in verse 2 he praises them because they "cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false". Second, in verse 6, Jesus

praises them saying, "you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." The sense we get here and elsewhere in Scripture is that the Ephesians were people who took both doctrine and practise very seriously. It's worth noting that in his letter to them, Paul didn't have to take them to task over these sorts of matters. Paul warned them in Acts 20:

**Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in 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. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.**

The Ephesians took Paul's warning and exhortation to them seriously and stayed on the alert. About forty years after John wrote Revelation, Ignatius wrote to them, praising them for their zeal for gospel truth:

"Truth is the rule of life for all of you, and heresy has no foothold among you. The fact is, you have nothing more to learn from anyone, since you listen to Jesus Christ who speaks truthfully.... I have heard of certain persons from elsewhere passing through, whose doctrine was bad. These you did not permit to sow their seed among you; you stopped your ears, so as not to receive the seed sown by them...[You are] Christ-bearers and bearers of holiness, with the commandments of Jesus Christ for festal attire." (Ephesians 6:2, 9:1, 2)

False apostles showed up in Ephesus and the church, weighing their teaching against what they had been taught, turned them out and refused to listen. Specifically, at the time of writing, they've been resisting the

teachings of the Nicolaitans. We don't know a lot about this group. Ignatius says they were followers of Nicolas of Antioch, one of the first seven deacons, but one who went wrong. This false teaching comes up three times in these letters to the churches. In verse 14, as Jesus speaks to the church in Pergamum, he refers to a group called the "Balaamites", whose teachings were the same. Jesus warns the church at Pergamum that these people, like Balaam in the Old Testament, enticed God's people to eat food sacrificed to idols and to engage in sexual immorality. Both of those things are noteworthy, because they were part of the short list of things gentile Christians must avoid that the apostles drew up at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

Jesus refers to this heresy a third time in the letter to Thyatira, where he rebukes them for tolerating "Jezebel", a false prophetess enticing the people into sexual immorality and to eat food offered to idols. So this heresy was making the rounds of the Asian churches in one form or another and, to their credit, the Ephesians have rejected it entirely. In contrast, the church at Pergamum has tolerated this heresy amongst some of her members and, worse, the Thyatirans have allowed at least one prominent proponent of this heresy into some sort of leadership or prophetic teaching position.

So this is all wonderful. These brothers and sisters know the gospel and the scriptures and they're well-taught in the faith. Not only that, they have been faithful in discipline and giving no quarter to false teachers, false doctrines, or sinful practises. They not only know the wolves when they see them, but they've faithfully fought them off. But, not everything is wonderful. Jesus says to them, "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."

In her zeal for gospel truth in a battle with heretics and false prophets, the Christians at Ephesus had lost their love. From our perspective it may seem that some of the other seven churches are guilty of greater failures—tolerating a false prophet who promotes sexual immorality, for example—but only two of the churches are actually threatened with destruction for their failings and Ephesus is one of them. “But we’ve kept the gospel pure, Jesus! We’ve cast out the idolaters and the sexually immoral, Jesus! We’ve preserved orthodoxy, Jesus!” And Jesus responds, “I hate the works and false teaching of the Nicolaitans just as you do and I appreciate your zeal, but where is your love? Without love you are nothing.”

Think of the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Christians:

**If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.**

**Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

(1 Corinthians 13:1-7)

And Paul finishes a few verses later, writing:

**So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.** (1 Corinthians 13:13)

There’s the key. Even if we’ve got everything else right, if we lack love, we fail to be the Church. But what exactly does Jesus mean when he says they’ve abandoned the love they had at first? If you read the commentaries, some will say that it’s simply love of Jesus. They’re so focused on doctrine, that they’ve forgotten Jesus. Others say that their battles with false teachers and apostles have left them inwardly focused and that they’ve lost the love that had once motivated them to engage in mission, proclaiming the gospel, and caring for people both inside and outside the church. Others say that the battle for orthodoxy has left them cold, angry, bitter, and suspicious towards others.

Brothers and Sisters, from my personal experience living through the “Anglican realignment”, I can’t see any reason why Jesus mightn’t have all these failures to love in mind. I have observed that as we hunker down doing battle with apostates, those fights can consume all we’ve got to the neglect of other critical aspects of ministry. And, when the fight’s over, it can be terribly difficult to stop fighting. Many in the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church fought valiantly for the gospel against men and women who held it in contempt and had abandoned the faith. They fought a life and death ecclesiastical struggle. And that battle is largely over, a new orthodox province has been established, but some just can’t stop fighting. And after fighting for so long, it’s often easy to forget that the smaller battles we now face within our own church are not with the enemy, but with brothers and sisters who love Jesus and are trying to be faithful to Scripture. They may be wrong on some issues. And some of those issues are gravely serious: “Three Streams” theology, women’s ordination, Critical Theory, language relating to sexual identity. But these are brothers and sisters, not the enemy. We need to be zealous for gospel

truth, but we also need to be equally zealous to love.

We need to pray for wisdom and discernment to know where to draw the lines between friend and enemy and to know how to love in each case—because we are called to love our enemies. It’s not easy. I struggle with this myself. I hate going to meetings of the local ministerial because they leave me so discouraged. There are mainline churches that have forsaken the gospel and that, much as the Nicolaitans, are fine with sexual immorality. There are churches that have mixed the prosperity heresy with the gospel. More recently Marxist social theories that are antithetical to the gospel are being promoted. There are churches that promote false prophets and teachers—not too many years ago we even had a pastor making bogus claims to be an apostle. And, Brothers and Sisters, it discourages me and it makes me angry. And I sit there thinking that I’m doing Jesus a disservice being there and pretending that I share the same faith with some of these people—because in some cases I really don’t. And I ask, what do truth and love demand of me here? How, in my desire to preserve and even fight for gospel truth, do I love the folks who call themselves Christians, but have forsaken the faith. How do I love the folks whom I know are brothers in Christ, but with whom I have serious disagreements and grave concerns? I don’t always know. I tend to err on the side of love and then I’m frustrated, because I know that I’ve sacrificed truth.

It’s not easy, but it’s vital that we be both zealous for truth *and* love. If the love is lacking, it becomes a cancer that will destroy the church from the inside out. A zeal for truth coupled with a lack of love, I’ve observed, first makes us a very unattractive community, and second, it kills our mission. We circle the wagons and start shooting at everyone on the outside—and sometimes on the inside,

too—and forget that many out there need our gospel ministry. Jesus warns the Ephesians, “I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” Honestly, I’m not sure that such a church actually needs Jesus to come and remove its lampstand. When we forsake love, we kind of kick over the lampstand ourselves—or like Israel in Jesus’ parable, we hide it under a bushel.

St. John, I think, had it figured out. Consider that on the one hand, John was known as a “son of thunder”. Peter was the “rock”—the apostle who was solid and unmoving. John—and his brother, James—preached the good news about Jesus with power like thunder. He took it seriously and he wasn’t afraid to speak and act on the truth. There’s a story that has come down through history about John’s time in Ephesus. John entered a local bathhouse only to be informed that the heretic, Cerinthus, was already inside taking a bath. John ran outside, forgoing his bath, lest he share even a public space with a false teacher.

At the same time, this same John is sometimes called the “apostle of love”. This is the man who wrote to the churches:

**Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)**

A second story that has come down to us from John’s time in Ephesus is that as he approached old age, he distilled all of his preaching into a one-sentence sermon that he would frequently repeat, “Little children, love one another.” John, I think, had an equal zeal for both gospel truth and gospel love. I don’t want to say he found the “balance”, because I don’t think it’s a matter of balance. Balance means you end up compromising, giving up some measure of the truth in the name of the love, for example.

What we really need is to learn how to be equally zealous for both, compromising neither.

“Hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” Jesus says. “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” I think the Ephesians thought they had conquered. They’d fought the good fight against false teaching—and were continuing to fight it—and by all accounts they were winning. But their vision of obedience to Jesus, their vision of what the Christian life entails had become too narrow. They’d won the battle on one front, but were losing it badly on another—and weren’t even aware of it. Love is just as important as truth.

But to those who do hold the course in faithfulness to Jesus, he promises the tree of life, paradise restored, the life of the age to come lived in the presence of God.

Brothers and Sisters, the good news is that the Christians in Ephesus did take Jesus’ warning here to heart. Again, we have that passage from Ignatius’ letter to them from some forty years later in which he praises them. They continued to be zealous for the truth, but he also notes that they are a holy people who wear the commandments of Jesus as their festal attire. Ephesus remained the centre of Christianity in that part of Asia for many centuries. Ephesus hosted the Third Ecumenical Council. The church in Ephesus only ceased to exist, hundreds of years later, because the city itself ceased to exist as its harbour silted up. But I think it’s worth something that while the name “Ephesus” disappeared from the map, the name “Ayasuluk” replaced it in Turkish. The name comes from the Greek *Hagios Theologos*, the name of the great basilica built in Ephesus and named after St. John, whom they called “Theologian”. Not even the name of the city survived the march of the ages, but the name of the church in Ephesus lives on.

So Brothers and Sisters, persevere, firm in the knowledge that Jesus holds us in his hands as we walk this difficult path. But remember, too, that perseverance isn’t limited to the sometimes obvious struggles—the ones over doctrinal and practical orthodoxy. It’s true, we cease to be the Church when we fail to uphold those gospel truths. But remember that love is just as important. Come to the Table this morning and experience once again who we are as the people of God, set apart to holiness, but set apart by the one who gave his life for us. The one, who on the cross, shows us not only the importance of love, but also what it looks like. Little children, love one another.

Let’s pray: Lord Jesus, in the collect we asked you to grant that we, like John the Baptist, might be faithful ministers and stewards of your mysteries, preparing the way for you by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. We prayed that in doing so, you will find us an acceptable people in your sight. We ask specifically for zeal for gospel truth and equally for love. Give us wisdom that we might never compromise one for the other, but stand firmly for both in equal measure. Amen.