

A Letter To The Church In Ephesus

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Preacher: Rev. Ruaridh Maclean

[0 : 0 0] to the passage that we read in Revelation chapter 2 and we can read again the first of these letters that we read, the letter to the church in Ephesus. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands, I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance and how you cannot bear with those who are evil but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and found them to be false. I know 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 work 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. Now we have here of course in this chapter and the following chapter the seven letters to the seven churches of Asia, these messages from Jesus to these various congregations of God's people in the Asian area. That area is of course part of what we know now as Turkey and it's amazing really to think about these churches there because for so long that area had virtually no witness. Now there are some churches there now and we praise the Lord for that, but that in itself is a salutary warning to us that just because a church has known gospel blessing, just because a church has served faithfully at least for a time does not mean that it is inevitably always going to be there because when the drift kicks in and when people turn from the things of God, when God's people become cool to the things of God, then the church begins to die. And you know it's fascinating looking through these letters because we see for the most part churches that the Lord has a very strong message for now there are words of encouragement as well and there are one or two churches that are doing pretty well generally speaking, but it starts off here with the church in Ephesus and this is fascinating because the church in Ephesus is the only church of the ones that we have here that we have an entire letter written to in the rest of the scriptures. Of course we know a little bit about some of the other churches because of what's recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, but this is the only church listed here where we have an entire letter that was written to them, the letter to the Ephesians of course. And Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus is a really encouraging letter because we see a church that seems to be doing pretty well. They don't have the same kind of issues that you find in the church in Corinth or the church in Galatia which is relatively close by, Corinth of course across the sea, but you know we don't see the same kind of issues there. It looks like when you read through the letter to the Ephesians and the accounts in Acts that the church in Ephesus actually was doing pretty well. And it's interesting because in a sense what you read Jesus saying to them is that in some ways they actually are doing reasonably well. They're doing reasonably well as a church in certain ways. They are absolutely committed. They are bearing up under a very heavy burden in the difficult

circumstances that they experienced. They are sticking to God's word. They're holding tight to the truth. And yet Jesus says to them, I have this against you that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Now those are strong words that you have abandoned the love that you had at first. You would think given that they're holding the truth precious that they're enduring patiently. You would say well surely that means that they haven't done that. That they still hold on to their love for Jesus. Well maybe in a sense that was true. But what Jesus is saying to them is that their love for him is not what it should be. It's not what it once was. And in that sense he is challenging them because there's a reality there that needs to be addressed. And the wonderful thing about the Lord Jesus is that he doesn't leave us alone and let us go on just as we are all the time or just as we happen to find ourselves at any given moment. Jesus comes and he addresses the issues that need to be addressed in our experience. And he does this for the church in Ephesus.

He doesn't just come along and say, pat them on the back and say, you're doing great. Just keep on going. Just keep on patiently enduring. He doesn't do that. He comes and he challenges them on an issue that he knows will become a major problem if it's not addressed. Because we have to face up to the fact and the reality that we are fallen human beings and that we have a tendency to drift towards the things that we shouldn't drift towards. And that in our experience that our lives are liable to go along the wrong path at times. And Jesus is not willing for that to happen. And we need to be ready to accept that, to accept the challenge that Jesus sometimes brings to us. And sometimes I think that as you know, belonging to an orthodox denomination, belonging to a denomination with a long tradition of faithfulness to the word of God, belonging to a congregation with a long testimony and faithfulness to the word of God. When we find ourselves in these kind of situations, it's quite easy actually to pat ourselves on the back and saying, aren't we doing well compared to this church or that church or that situation or that other situation? It's easy for us to actually do that. Now, we may do it in a slightly more subtle way than to pat ourselves on the back and say, aren't we doing well? But in essence, we can fall into that trap very easily and fail to take on board the challenge that God gives us in His Word so frequently that we are to look at our own lives carefully, to consider our own lives. We are, for instance, challenged to put our house in order. We see the challenge also, the reminder that is given through Peter's letter that judgment begins at the house of God and that we need to take our situation seriously in the sense that we recognize that we are not immune to the difficulties and the problems that we see set before us in the Scriptures. We're not immune to these things. So we should take these things seriously, take them to heart and seek the Lord all the more. And when we see this challenge that the church in Ephesus are given to remember, therefore, from where they have fallen, to repent and do the works that they did at first, when they are given this challenge to recognize that they've abandoned the love that they had at first, we should also take that to heart. That even though that might not be our situation right now, it may or may not be as individuals, as congregations, it's hard to absolutely pinpoint that and everybody's situation, I guess, is different as individuals. But we need to recognize and acknowledge that this is, it's a possibility that this could be true of any one of us at any given time in our experience, that we

could have lost that edge spiritually speaking, that we might say we should have. You know, one of the things you might say about this is that it's difficult to live our lives on the edge. Now, I think my own conviction in relation to this is that this ties in very much in relation to the testimony of the church, the testimony of God's people and their readiness to testify about Jesus Christ. You know, when we come to faith, when we are full of the things of God, when the things of God are so overwhelming for us at the beginning of our journey, when we've fallen in love with Jesus, when we've realized the wonder of God's love to us has revealed to us in Jesus Christ, it just overflows at that point in our experience. It's hard to keep it in. It's a bit like when a person falls in love.

[12 : 24] The person falls in love with someone else, they come into marriage and they're full of it, you know, in the best sense, they're full of love for one another and admiration for one another, and they just can't help but share with other people about the person that they love, because that person means so much to them. And that's true of God's people, and they're full of love for Jesus. They can't help but share the wonder of who Jesus is for them and the wonder of the love that he's shown to them. But it can very easily happen that as we go on in our journey, that we lose that edge. It's a challenging edge to have, because when we bear witness to Jesus Christ, when we testify to Jesus Christ in the world, the world generally speaking is not terribly enamored with such a thing. And I'm sure every one of us has experienced in one way or another, where we've in situations where we've shared the hope that we have in Jesus, and people just switch off, they don't want to hear.

Sometimes maybe we've had an experience where a person comes back with a biting comment, because they really don't want to have anything like that put their way. And when we're living at that edge, at the edge of that kind of situation, it isn't necessarily comfortable.

And one of the realities that we need to acknowledge in ourselves is that it's very easy for us to do what is comfortable and to gravitate towards what is comfortable. And if it's not comfortable, we have a tendency to shy away from it. And it's not comfortable to always be at that edge, where we are interacting with the world around us in a way where there is the possibility of kickback. It's not necessarily a comfortable thing. And you know, if we pull back from that, if we put up the barriers, it has an impact. And part of the impact that it has is that it has a tendency to dull our sense of love and appreciation for the Lord.

It has a tendency to do that in our experience. And this word that the church in Ephesus received challenges that challenges them regarding the fact that they've abandoned their first love. Now they haven't abandoned their love for Jesus entirely. They still love the Lord.

They're still committed to his word. They're still patiently enduring. They are going through difficulties. But this edge seems to be gone. They're not doing the works that they did at first. Now, I think belonging to a church steeped in the Reformation tradition can make us kind of jump back when we hear the word works. And, you know, the word works is addressed to us that we have works that we are to do. But of course, we need to remember and remind ourselves that works have to be part of our reality as believers, as James reminds us that faith without works is dead. And works have to be part and parcel of our reality.

[17:16] Jesus is challenging the church in Ephesus to repent and to do the works that they did at first. And I'm convinced that what is intended there is really to do with their testimony, their witness, their going out with the message of the gospel, their going out with the message of the gospel. And I hope that they have within them and sharing it with the communities around them. Now, I suppose you could say, Well, Jesus could just have let them carry on as they were and be comfortable. They were still being a kind of witness because they hadn't denied the truth. They were still living by it. They were still faithful to it. But the thing is, is that when we don't engage proactively in sharing the message of the gospel, the gospel doesn't go forth very much. And the church doesn't grow very much when the message is not shared actively and proactively. When we look at the Acts of the Apostles, we see that they were going out and sharing this message all over the place. They were sharing it at every opportunity and the church was growing and flourishing. Now, I don't know if it has anything to do with our slightly subdued Scottish culture, or maybe our slightly subdued, even more slightly, even more subdued, I wouldn't be even more slightly, but even more subdued Presbyterian culture in Scotland, that we hold these things back. Maybe it's part and parcel of it. I don't know. But whatever the case is, if the message doesn't go forth, people, not very many people, come. That's the reality. And sometimes we can say to ourselves, well, people are hard to the gospel. People don't want to hear the gospel. And maybe they don't. But that's not really a particularly good reason for us to not share the gospel.

Because, you know, often a person will react against the gospel, even quite forcefully, and yet it impacts them. You know, the person who has a negative reaction to the gospel may actually be closer to receiving the gospel than the person who seems okay with hearing the message. Because that person may be just not bothered by anything that they hear, which is which is a pretty scary predicament to be in. But the other person's actually bothered about it. They may not lack the message because it bothers them, but it does bother them for one reason or another. And you know, it's amazing the number of people who come to faith who are bothered by the message, but they've had the message shared with them, and then they just can't get away from it. They can't hide from it. And it just eats away at them in a good way. And eventually wears down their resistance as the Holy Spirit applies this message to their hearts and challenges them about the reality of the state of their souls.

And in that way draws them to see their great need of Jesus. And so this message that we have given to the church in Ephesus is a message that challenges the church to do the first words to be the witnesses that God has called us to be to be those who act as the apostles act to go out and to share the message of the gospel and to communicate the hope that we have within us. It is the most important thing that we can do other than pray for people.

It's really the essence of what the Lord has given to the church as a work to do. There are two strands to that great work. The first of course is prayer and the other is ministry of the word. Now of course, we have a tendency to think of the preacher and the evangelist, but every one of us is called to be a witness to testify to the truth of God's word to the message of the hope of the gospel of Jesus Christ to share that word that has given us hope and life. It's a challenge. There's no way round that. It's a challenge, I think, probably to each and every one of us. And you know, the challenge that keeps getting repeated through these letters also comes to us. He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. Are we listening? Are we waiting upon the Lord to receive his word, to receive the challenge that it often brings, but also to receive the encouragement, the strengthening, the equipping that we need to enable us to be who God has called us to be as his witnesses in this world so that we might also be like the disciples where the disciples at Pentecost and even after Pentecost. At times we see them gathered in prayer with a sense of trepidation. In Acts chapter four, for instance, we see that great prayer that the disciples pray. They pray there for boldness. This is after Pentecost. We might think, well, surely after Pentecost they would have been so fired up, they would just go out there and they'd be preaching to this, that and the next person and seeing people coming to faith all over. Well, in a sense that was true, but it wasn't in their own strength.

And they continued to have this awareness of their great need of God's strength to enable them to witness in this way. So they pray for boldness, even in the face of the difficulties that are coming their way at that time. Now, we don't have anywhere near those difficulties, but we all have our own particular issues that hold us back. And so we also need to pray in that same way to pray that the Lord would grant us his boldness, a holy boldness by which we might also go out and share this great message of hope with those around us and our families and our villages and the wider community and our workplaces, no matter where it is, but that we might have this passion, this burden that we know we ought to have, because it's the pattern that we see in God's Word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you and we praise you this evening for the reality that you come to us and speak to us in and through your Word, that you address the issues in our lives as individuals, as congregations, you speak into our experience. O Lord, we do pray that you would grant us years to hear what your Spirit is saying through your Word to us. We pray these things in

[26 : 52] Jesus' name. Amen. It's concluded singing from Psalm 73 in the Scottish Salter. We're going to sing from verse 25 down to the end of the Psalm.

Whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone and in the earth, in my desire, besides thee, there is none, my flesh and heart doth faint and fail, but God doth fail me never, for of my heart God is the strength and portion forever. These last four stanzas of the Psalm to God's praise. Whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone?

Whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone and in the earth, in my desire, besides thee, there is none, my flesh and heart doth faint and fail, but God doth fail me never, for of my heart God is the strength and portion forever. For lo, they found the power from me, for ever bearish shall, and by the morning from the goal, the house is destroyed, O Lord, but surely it is good for me that I draw near to God. In God I draw near to God, and all I worse, I make Him fail abroad.

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.