

**“LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 2 (Ephesus)”**  
*Revelation 2:1-7*

A couple of weeks ago, you may recall, we started to look into this amazing and awesome vision that John records in the last book of the Bible, *Revelation*. John had an astonishing glimpse of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, a vision which overwhelmed him and left him apparently lifeless at the feet of his Saviour. As John eventually looked up at Jesus, glowing with all the intensity and brilliance of heaven, he heard him say that he was to write down all that he saw and make sure it was sent to a group of seven churches in the west of Asia Minor.

The first part of what John had to write was a series of short letters from Jesus to his followers in those seven churches, letters which contain encouragements, warnings, rebukes and inspiration which not only speak into the contemporary situations of Christians who were struggling under growing persecution from the Roman state, but also have something to say to us today, if we are prepared to listen.

Now, there are all kinds of things we could say about the structure of the letters. When you get home, read through chapters 2 and 3 of *Revelation* and notice the way in which each letter is put together and you can identify a common framework for each one. And we could say all kinds of interesting things about the references within the letters, which refer both to the vision of the Risen Christ in chapter 1 and to various specific historical things which we know about the seven towns in which these churches were situated. It's all quite fascinating – but it's not the point of the letters. Where it helps us to understand the main message, we'll mention such things, but otherwise we won't take up time on history lessons which aren't necessarily going to help us in our relationship with Jesus.

If you are interested in all the background, you can read about it in any number of books and commentaries on *Revelation*. If you want a couple that are easy to read and understand, try either William Barclay's *Letters to The Seven Churches* (if it's still in print) or Stephen Travis's *You've Got Mail* (originally published as *Church Under Fire*). And in the Lichfield Room there are some calendars on sale with pictures of the sites of these seven churches in modern-day Turkey, money from which will go to help Christians who are still under fire in such areas.

Anyway, this first letter is to a church we've heard of – the church in Ephesus. You can read about it in *Acts 19* and you can read Paul's words to the people there in his *Letter To The Ephesians*. By the time John wrote these words that Jesus had given him to send to them, the church was probably around 40 years old, well-established, fairly significant and, from what we're about to see, pretty active. Jesus has a couple of points to make to them which we need to listen to today, twenty centuries after the words were first heard. “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*” What's Jesus got to say to us through these ancient texts?

Well, as in most of these little letters, Jesus starts off very positively. If you've got your Bibles open, look at vv2,3. Here is a church that is hard-working and committed. The Christians there stick at their activity under difficult circumstances. The city was a centre of the cult of Diana and her temple dominated the skyline and was not only a very important religious factor in Ephesus' life, but also a social one and an economic one, with all kinds of industry from tourism to sex dependent on it. To try and compete against that was a pretty tall order. If you look into *Acts 19*, you'll see that Paul caused a riot amongst the souvenir sellers at the Temple of Diana when they thought his new religion would knock the bottom out of their trade in Diana-themed merchandise. The people of Ephesus had a reputation for being fickle and superstitious, so the Ephesian Christians' commendation for being perseverant was important. As was their solid foundation in sound doctrine, weeding out the heretics and standing firm against people such as the Nicolaitans, who managed to compromise their confession of the Christian faith with idolatry and immorality. This was a pretty good church, it seemed.

And as we read through these words we may well find ourselves identifying with a lot of this. Here at Wade Street Church, in the centre of twenty-first century Lichfield, we consider ourselves to be a bunch

of hard-working Christians. It's not always easy, living in a culture that has an awful lot in common with first-century Ephesus – a culture steeped in immorality (which we have, by and large got used to), a society that has very little time for the words and ways of Jesus Christ, an environment in which compromise and easy tolerance have effectively emasculated the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But we do lots of stuff to keep the profile of the church up – just look at the last few weeks: An Evening with Dana, An Evening with Henry Olonga, Messy Church, Keswick in Lichfield, Just 10, and all the regular things that go on here (Monday Lunch, Take-A-Break, Prayer groups and Bible studies, activities for children and young people). This is a busy church. There are a lot of busy people. And we have a great reputation in the city (and, as I found out last weekend, abroad too).

And we like to think we're pretty sound. After all, we wouldn't get Keswick in Lichfield coming here if we weren't! Some of us can sniff a whiff of heresy from a very long way off and we like to think that our teaching and preaching are biblical and relevant. We're doing pretty well, aren't we? And some of us are working very hard indeed week by week, day by day. Those of you who've been around for a while will know that we've had our hardships and our difficulties, but overcome them. And, although our bodies may be physically tired after a week of cooking meals, operating AV equipment, shifting chairs and trying to be nice to people, we haven't grown weary. If we read as far as the end of v3 of this letter we can feel that we are very much like the church at Ephesus and doing enough to get into Jesus' good books.

And then we read v4. It's a bit like pricking the bubble. There's a great big "Yet ...". The Ephesians had a great deal going for them. They were a model church in many ways – and yet! They did all this stuff, but they'd forgotten *why* they were doing it. They had lost their first love, their passion for Jesus himself. Billy Graham wrote a book about *Revelation* entitled *Approaching Hoofbeats* and in there he says this: "The first love of the Ephesians had settled into a faithfulness to doctrinal purity ... Christ is calling the Ephesian church away from a respectable, comfortable, passionless, lukewarm religion." He wants them to get real with him again. He isn't interested simply in their hard work and scriptural soundness. He wants their love and their passion for him to be revived and fill them with real zeal for him. Some years ago at the church where I worked in London we had Joel Edwards to preach one Sunday morning and in the vestry beforehand the senior minister was regaling him with an account of all that the church was doing, its many activities, its growing membership, its community programmes and so on. Joel turned to me and said, "Well, I hope the Lord appreciates all you're doing for him."

Can we see ourselves in this too? We love doing stuff here, but can we remember why we're doing it? Can *you* remember why *you're* doing it – whether it's catering or flower-arranging or cleaning or staffing the office or attending the prayer meeting or serving drinks to toddlers' mums or looking after the property? Do you have that vital passion for Jesus that you once had? That's what Jesus says is the first thing to do – "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" Think back to the relationship you used to have with Jesus. William Cowper was a great English poet of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was also a committed Christian. And he was also subject to appalling bouts of depression. Some of our greatest hymns were written by him – and some of those hymns contain terribly sad words. This is from *O for a closer walk with God* (494, if you want to read it all):

*Where is the blessedness I knew  
When first I saw the Lord?  
Where is that soul-refreshing view  
Of Jesus and his word?  
What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!  
How sweet their memory still.  
But they have left an aching void  
The world can never fill.*

Can you remember the blessedness you once knew? Can you work out where the passion has gone? And what can you do about it?

Well, Jesus says that you need to repent, to turn around and look at Jesus rather than at the activities you're doing for him. Cowper's hymn continues:

*Return, O Holy Dove, return,  
Sweet messenger of rest!  
I hate the sins that made thee mourn  
And drove thee from my breast.  
The dearest idol I have know,  
Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from thy throne  
And worship only thee.*

Take time to reflect on what it is that has dulled your love for Jesus Christ, to consider what may have dampened down the fire of your passion for him. The writer of the *Letter To The Hebrews* says at the beginning of chapter 12 that we are to ensure that we follow the way of Christ unentangled by sin and by "everything that hinders". There are all kinds of things in our lives that are not actually sinful, but which are edging Jesus out of our lives, things to which we give time, energy and resources that could be better spent improving our relationship with Jesus. We need the help of Cowper's "Holy Dove", the Holy Spirit, to open our eyes to what has drawn us away from Jesus and to fill us with a new hunger, a new passion for him. Pray that God will touch your life with his Spirit this morning.

And then, as Jesus counsels the Ephesians, you might be able to "do the things you did at first". You might be able to return to that first love you had for Jesus, a love which will fill your life and enliven your work for him. When I first mentioned that we were going to look at these seven letters a couple of people remembered that I'd preached on them before and said that it wasn't long since we'd considered them. It was actually in February 1995! And on that occasion I said that we should return to our love of serving Christ. Someone pointed out the error of that. For some of us, you see, serving Christ is everything – meetings, working, preaching, writing, doing stuff around the church – and that love can be simply the love of the job. We need to get back to the love of Christ himself. In *Luke 10:38-42* we read the story of Mary and Martha – Martha rushing around doing things for Jesus but not actually spending time with him; Mary sitting at his feet, listening and loving him.

Once we have demonstrated our love for and our total dependence on Jesus, then he will lead us in the tasks he has for us and give us the strength to perform them out of love for him – not out of a sense of self-glorification, nor to enhance the reputation of Wade Street Church, nor to try and show what great Christians we are – but to demonstrate that first love of Jesus and bring glory to him. We love Jesus for who he is – our Saviour and Lord, our Protector and Provider. In a few moments we're going to sing Graham Kendrick's song, *All I Once Held Dear* and the chorus goes like this:

*Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you,  
There is no greater thing.  
You're my all, you're the best,  
You're my joy, my righteousness,  
And I love you, Lord.*

Can you really sing those words and mean them? Of course, we mean them when we sing them. More to the point, then, is that obvious in your life? Is there that deep passion for Jesus, that love for him that is still like the first love you had for him, however many years ago it was that you first committed yourself to him?

Now, you may say that it would have been better, more interesting, more biblically sound to pull this letter apart this morning, to look at all the allusions and references within it, spend a bit of time getting to grips with the history of Ephesus. You may even say that these words were written to specific people many centuries ago and we cannot apply them to ourselves today. In a sense that is doing exactly what Jesus is criticising here. He uses those words that appear towards the end of each of these letters, words we quoted earlier on – "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." If you want to take this seriously, then let the Holy Spirit speak these words into your situation. And if you do really hear him speaking to you through this little Letter from the Lord, then respond. The words of

this song (*All I Once Held Dear*) will enable you to do that as you sing them as a prayer to God. Will you do that? Will you sing “*Now my heart’s desire is to know you more*” – and mean it?

*Discussion notes on the next page.*

## **THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS** *Revelation 2:1-7*

The letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor (Turkey) which we find in the early chapters of *Revelation* came to John from the Risen Lord Jesus Christ in a vision. They were written to Christians towards the end of the first century AD, by which time many of the churches had lost the radical edge that they had shown in *Acts*. This was probably partly due to persecution, but also partly the result of a comfortable conformity.

The letters all follow a broadly similar pattern – each letter has a commendation, a warning, some kind of remedy for their situation and a challenge (as well as some other features). There are references back to the description of the Risen Christ in chapter 1, as well as a number of specific references which link what Christ has to say to the local situation in each city.

The first of these letters – to the church at Ephesus – deals particularly with the issue of comfortable, conformist Christianity. The Ephesian Christians were hard-working and doctrinally sound. They had a pretty tough task in a busy sea-port like Ephesus, which was not only a generally immoral place, but also a centre of pagan worship of, amongst others, the goddess Diana. But in all their hard work and endeavour for the Kingdom of God, they had forgotten **why** they were doing it – they had "*forsaken [their] first love.*"

This letter is a call to return to a real love of and relationship with Jesus Christ. The Christians in Ephesus are encouraged to look back at their earlier experience of Christ and compare it with their present situation. The clear implication is that they have fallen a long way from their original commitment to Christ, and they are urged to "*repent and do the things [they] did at first.*" If not, the consequences could be disastrous (*v5b*).

The same challenge comes to us today, when the temptation to sit back on our spiritual laurels and take our relationship with Christ fairly lightly is even more attractive. It is imperative that we ensure we have not lost sight of Jesus Christ and that we cultivate our relationship with him.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. The letter begins with encouragement for the work of the Ephesian church. If this was a letter to Wade Street Church, what encouraging things do you think might be said?
2. There is then a warning (*v4*). Do you think the same thing might be said of Wade Street Church today? (What about you personally? Think about it, but don't necessarily share aloud.)
3. What do you think are "*the things you did at first*" in the Ephesian context and in our own situation?
4. What are the things that tend to sap the vitality of our relationship with Christ? What can we do about them? Share some of the ways in which you try to keep alive your relationship with Christ.
5. The warning of what might happen (*v5b*) seems very drastic. Can we still take such threats seriously? How might they work out in practice? What are the implications for our assurance?