

Place: Lurgan Baptist Church 7:10:2003

Reading: Revelation 2:1-7

EXPLORING THE FUTURE

3. THE CHURCH THAT LEFT ITS LOVE

The Austrian composer Franz Joseph Haydn was a man with a cheerful disposition despite the fact that he was married to a bitter and malicious woman. She continually belittled both Haydn and his music. Several times, purely out of spite, she stole the only existing copies of his music from his desk and destroyed them. Haydn spent much of his career travelling around Europe, partly because his talent's were in such a demand throughout the Continent, but also because travel gave him time away from his disagreeable wife. During a visit to England on one occasion, a friend visited Haydn in his rented room in London.

This friend noticed a large stack of unopened letters on Haydn's desk and asked the composer why he did not open his mail. "*All of those letters are from my wife,*" Haydn jovially explained. "*We write to each other every week but I do not open her letters, and I am sure she does not open mine.*" In Revelation chapters 2 and 3 we find a stack of letters, seven in all, which have largely lain ignored and unopened by the Christian church over the years. Many people tend to skip over these seven letters to the churches, so eager are they to hurry on to those juicy, action-packed blood-and-thunder sections of Revelation. We would rather hear about the great cataclysms of the last days than be confronted with the urgent challenge of our own present moment. How tragic ! These seven letters to seven churches are powerful letters, burning with urgency. Their message is still as vital and timely today as when first written. Now we can view these churches before us in a three-fold manner.

(1) WE CAN VIEW THEM HISTORICALLY:

First and foremost these are seven letters written to seven actual, historical churches found in the Roman province of Asia, which was located on the Western seaboard of what we now know as Turkey. Geographically these seven cities form a rough circle and they are listed here in the order which a messenger might visit them. Sailing from Patmos he would arrive at Ephesus, then he would travel north to Smyrna and Pergamum and then south east to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. So the Risen Lord had a direct message to seven literal churches existing at that time.

(2) WE CAN VIEW PROPHETICALLY:

The plan of the book seems to indicate this. (1:19)

" *The things which thou hast seen.*" - Chapter 1.

" *The things which are.*" - Chapter's 2-3 " *The things which shall be hereafter.*" -

Chapter 4-22 So chapters 2 and 3 reveal to us conditions in the church from Pentecost to the Rapture. In

other words each church may be seen as representing a different phase in church history.

(1:3)

(3) WE CAN VIEW THEM TYPICALLY:

One might ask the question, why are only Seven churches addressed ? Why these particular seven churches ? Certainly there were more than seven churches in the area ? (Col 1:2 4:13 Acts 20:5) Other churches could have been chosen. But the Lord chose these seven churches because they represent conditions that have prevailed throughout church history, from the beginning to the end. Any condition of any church in any

place at any time may be found here. Now the first of these seven letters is addressed to Ephesus

if for no better reason than because it was nearer to Patmos than the other six cities, yet Ephesus was more than the nearest city, it had a distinction all of its own. Its citizens liked to call it

" *The Metropolis of Asia.*" This was a very prosperous business centre because it was situated on the trade route from Rome to the East. Four major roadways intersected at Ephesus, bringing businessmen and merchants from the important cities of the Roman provinces. Ephesus was also a centre of Pagan Worship. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was located here in Ephesus the Temple of Diana, a massive structure that was as long as two football fields. With Temple worship there not only came

idolatry but immorality. Small wonder businessmen travelled the four major roadways to Ephesus. They came flocking into the Temple to have their every sexual fantasy fulfilled. For the worship of Artemis (Diana) was unspeakably vile. Her idol was a gross many breasted monstrosity, popularly believed to have fallen from heaven. (Acts 19:35)

The temple was attended by numerous priests, eunuchs and slaves. Thousands of priestesses who were little more than ritual prostitutes, played a major role in the worship of Diana. Ephesus became known as " *The Vanity Fair of the Ancient World.*" Yet it was there, in the midst of that godless city, that God planted a church. Paul recognised the strategic importance of this city and went there on his third missionary journey.

(Acts 19-20) He spent three years establishing the work of God. Timothy also

laboured there building on the spiritual foundation laid by his spiritual father (1 Tim 1:3) and **" according to an early tradition the apostle John replaced Timothy toward the end of the first century as leader of the Ephesian church."** This church had enjoyed the labours of the best and most gifted men, but then gifted and godly ministers are no guarantee of a church's spiritual progress. Indeed while this church had enjoyed some

" Stellar Ministry," the Lord reminded them that He was in control of the ministry placing the " stars," where He pleased. How easy it is for a church to become proud and forget that pastor and teachers are Gods gifts who may be taken away at any time. (Eph 4:11) Now Ephesus was a very privileged church, the only church in the N.T. to which two apostles addressed letters. *" When Paul wrote to Ephesus it was the Climax Church of the day when John wrote some 20-30 years later it was the Crisis Church of the day."* *" I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love."* (2:4) They had not Lost their Fundamentalism but they had Lapsed into Formalism, they had not quit their Fervent Labouring, but they had left their First Love. The honeymoon was over.

(1) THEIR VITAL MINISTRY: COMMENDATION

How gracious of the Risen Lord to start with words of Commendation. (2:1) The word " angel," means messenger. Some scholars feel that angels are in view in this passage. But the New Testament nowhere teaches that angels are involved in the leadership of the church. J. Vernon McGee writes: *" It could refer to a member of the angelic host of heaven, it could refer to a ruler or teacher of the congregation. Personally, I think that it refers to the local pastors. It is good to hear a pastor being called an angel sometimes we are called other things."* Now notice the description of the Lord here.

HIS PROTECTION: *" He holdeth."* (2:1) In (Ch 1) He Has the stars, in (Ch 2) he Holds the stars. The word " hold," indicates keeping all of something in ones hand, like grasping a small coin within one's fist. We are protected, surrounded, encompassed by Christ's care.

HIS PRESENCE: *" He walketh."* (2:1) He walks with and among His churches. How challenging. For every detail of every church is known to Him.

HIS PLACE: *" in the midst."* (2:1) His Place must be Central and Pre-eminent.

HIS PERCEPTION: *" I know."* (2:2) because He knows he proceeds to gave each church an " X ray," of its condition. What did he know about Ephesus ? What did He commend them for ?

(a) SELFLESS AND SACRIFICIAL:

Christianity was no spectator sport here. They didn't come to church to be entertained. They were actively involved in the work of ministry. Sacrificially. Selflessly. Serving. Doing.

Toiling. Giving. Going. The word "works," in (2:2) means "activities," "labour," means, "toil," "patience," is "endurance or perseverance." It simply means that they served Christ to the point of exhaustion. Holy sweat rolled down their foreheads as they ministered in His name.

"Perseverance," (hupomone) means

they ministered under much stress and pressure. When they took on a task, they stuck with it until the job was finished. Teaching the Bible. Reaching souls. Supporting one another. Feeding the poor. Doing the ministry right and left. No lazy loafers at Ephesus. This was very Christ-like. For the Lord Jesus came not to be served, but to serve.

(Mk 10:45) Good deeds, selfless toil, long days, draining hours, exerting Himself to the point of exhaustion.

This was no armchair club for the propagation of the gospel. They were a lot like John Wesley.

It is said that John Wesley travelled 250,000 miles by horseback over 40 years of ministry. He preached more than 40,000 sermons, produced more than 400 books and learned 10 languages.

At 83 he was annoyed that he could not write more than 15 hours a day and at the age of 86 he was ashamed that he could not preach more than twice a day. He complained in his diary that there was an increasing tendency to lie in bed until 5.30am in the morning. (a) Are you ? Is this church "a veritable beehive of industry ?" So many believers are "lily Christians," they neither toil nor spin.

(b) STRICT AND SOUND:

"And how thou canst not bear them which are evil." (2:2) They set a high moral standard and chose not to tolerate sin in the camp. If one of their member slipped into sin, they would approach

that person, lovingly confront him, and call him to repentance. If that person wouldn't repent, the church would not allow this leaven to spread to the whole lump. This was no spiritual country club. *They didn't look like saints on Sunday and act like aint's on Monday.* They were serious about their walk with Christ. Do you know why we are so weak and feeble in these days ? Discipline has gone.

(Acts 5:1 1 Cor 5:1) The Lord went on "And thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars." Paul warned this church. "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." (Acts 20:29) What happened was this. When travelling preachers came to Ephesus, their doctrine was put to the test before they could get into the pulpit. Doctrinal error would not be tolerated here. They called a spade a spade. They

could smell a heretic a mile off. When they heard theological error, alarms went off. Flares went up. False teachers were given an apple and a road map.

Nicolaitan (2:6) means " *to conquer the people*," and some people think John was speaking here about the growing distinction between clergy and laity, a false distinction that is nowhere taught in the N.T. (1 Pet 2:9 Rev 1:6) What a church this was. This was a citadel of orthodoxy. A bastion of truth. A fortress for the faith. Is this important ? Absolutely. The church that stands for nothing will fall for anything. Any ministry can only be as strong as its doctrinal purity. Like the foundation of a house theological correctness provides stability, strength, and longevity. Some will say we are judgmental but Scripture says, " *Test the spirits,*" " *Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.*"
(1 Jn 4:1 1 Thes 5:21)

(c) STEADFAST AND STRONG:

" *And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured and hast not fainted.*"

(2: 3) Despite growing opposition to Christ, this church remained rock-solid. They wouldn't waver from their mission. While living in the hub of paganism, they held tenaciously to their witness for Christ. Even their motives were right. They endured for Christ's name sake, not their own. They served for His glory, not their own reputation. Toiling. Persevering. Strict. Sound. Steadfast. Strong. This place was hopping. What could possibly be wrong with a church like this ? Plenty. They had everything but the main thing. **Love.**

(2) THEIR PERSONAL DEFICIENCY: ACCUSATION:

How abruptly, the Lord changes the tone of this letter. The Master puts his finger on the one glaring deficiency in this church that threatened to ruin everything else. " *Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.*" *love.*" (2:4) Now the word, " *thou,*" must be counted singular and plural. The whole church had left their first love but they did it one by one.

(a) THIS WAS CRITICAL:

It always hurts when someone has something against you. But when Christ does, that's serious. Something was missing. This church had left its first love. Amid the Ephesians many ministries, and their tenacious stand for the truth, their love for Christ had grown cold. The more busy they became, the further they drifted away from simple devotion to Christ. *This was labour without love, doctrine without devotion, teaching without tenderness, activity without affection.* It was so serious that it

endangered the church's very existence. (2:5)

(b) THIS WAS GRADUAL:

Thirty years before John wrote these seven letters, Paul wrote the Ephesian epistle and in that letter there are at least twenty references to love. When Paul wrote to them he reminded them of their exalted position, "*Ye are Risen.*" (Eph 2:6) Now the Risen Lord says, "*Thou art Fallen.*" (2:5) The word "*left*," pictures something Gradual ! This departure didn't happen overnight. Somewhere along the way they lost their passion. Interestingly enough this church was located in a city which was the chief port of Asia Minor. Its harbour was given to much change because of its continual silting what was water became land, what was land became water. And the shifting character of the city was reflected in the church. Once they were in love with Christ, but now they have fallen out of love. A Christian was driving home from church. The wife was sitting in the front seat on the far left side. Her husband was in his usual place behind the steering wheel. Seemingly a large gulf separated them. With lonely eyes she looked at him and said, "*Dear, do you remember when we first met, how close we used to sit to each*

other ? You used to put your arm around me. What happened to those days ?" With one hand firmly attached to the steering wheel and the other resting on the empty space between them, he said, "*Well, I haven't moved.*" The distance was not because he had moved. A separation resulted because she had moved away. She had left her first love ! That's precisely what happened in the Ephesian church. Over the years they had left their first love !

Its so easy for ministry to become mechanical, relationship to become routine, doxology to slip back into cold orthodoxy. A person can have lots of activity for Christ, but little intimacy with Christ.

(c) THIS WAS FUNDAMENTAL:

What does our Lord mean when He says "*Thou hast left thy first love.*" (2:4) What is our first

love ? It's the love we felt for the Saviour when we first came to know Him. Fervent. Personal.

Excited. Uninhibited. Adventuresome. Reckless. Its that wonderful sense of discovery that He loves us, that He has delivered us, that He has freed us from our sins. Once our hearts went out to Him in gratitude. Once we had eyes for no-one but the Saviour. Do you ever watch a young couple in

love ? See how they talk to each other, how they touch each others hands, how their eyes meet. Talk to them and they probably won't even hear you. They are "*spaced out.*" They are lost in each other. They are thinking only of the wonder of each other.

That's the way it seemed to be when the world's most eligible bachelor, Prince Charles, Duke of Windsor exchanged wedding vows with the beautiful Lady Diana Spencer. It was all something of a fairy tale. A starry-eyed script that could have been written in Hollywood. With 750 million viewers watching around the globe via satellite, with the streets of London lined with thousands of admirers all craning their necks to get a glimpse of the newly wedded royal couple. Off they dashed to their honeymoon. Full of life. Full of love. Full of hope. But that was then.

For the clock struck twelve on this real-life Cinderella story. Somewhere along the way their lives grew apart. Their love grew cold. Stale. Stagnant. Mechanical. Routine. The fact is, the honeymoon was over. The glow was gone. Subsequent to all this disaster struck. This can happen to us spiritually. Once our hearts were so full of passion and excitement. Bible study was so life-changing. Prayer was so heart-lifting. Worship was so real. But that was *then*. What about now?

Dr. Campbell Morgan tells of a friend of his who had a little ten-year-old daughter whom he dearly loved. Father and daughter were always together. But then one time something came between them which the father could not understand. When he went out for a walk she always excused herself and told him she had to do something. One day it was his birthday and she came bouncing into his room with a smile on her face. She said, "*Daddy I have brought you a present.*" Opening the box he found a beautiful pair of slippers. "*This is lovely of you to buy these for me,*" "*But Daddy I did not buy them, I made them.*"

The father said, "*is this what you have been doing for the past three months?*" "*Yes,*" she said, "*but how did you know?*" "*Well, for three months I wanted much of you, but you were too busy. I like the slippers a lot, but the next time buy the slippers, for I would rather have you my child than anything you can make for me.*" My are you like this little girl? Active, busy, orthodox, out, how many nights for "*his name's sake*?" But could it be that the Risen Lord is saying to you this

"*Nevertheless love,*" What then do we need?

What are we to do? How can we recapture our

"*first love,*"? Well, notice not only (1) (2)

(3) THEIR SPIRITUAL RECOVERY: RESTORATION

With arms wide open, Christ prescribes the steps that lead back to the honeymoon stage. Practically speaking, here is how we again draw close to Him. Here is how to rekindle our lost passion for Christ. Here's how to fall back in love with the Saviour.

(a) REMEMBER:

" Remember from whence thou art fallen." (2:5) Literally, " keep on remembering." Too look back can be sinful (Lot's wife) but it can also be sensible. Remember back to when you first came to Christ. Replay that initial excitement. Refocus on those times when you really loved the Saviour. Do you remember the freshness of your first Love ? Do you remember when it was springtime in your soul ? Do you remember how you yearned to learn more of the Word ? Do you remember when your heart was filled with love for Christ ? Do you recall when you loved your fellow-believers ? Do you remember when you had a passion for souls ? Do you remember when you were the happiest Christian in the world before you met too many Bible scholars and saw too many church members ! Mythe road back to Christ begins by first remembering. Memory is the handmaid of revival.

(b) REPENT:

" And repent." (2:5) After you remember, repent. That means to change the direction of your life. It is a change of heart. A change of mind. A change of will. It means to head back to the way things once were. It is a turning round and coming back to Christ. The fact is this. Someone or something has replaced your first love. Its not that you don't have a first love anymore. Its that you have a new first love. Its no longer Christ. You see, anything that we love more than we love Christ is our new first love. What is it that you love more than Him ? Is it your job ? That relationship ? Your children ? Your home ? Do you need to get on your knees and confess your spiritual apathy ? Do you need to turn your cold heart back to Christ ?

(c) REPEAT:

" Do the first works." (2:5) In other words, *" Get back to the basics."* What are these first works ? The Risen Lord does not specifically tell us here, but we can discover what they are from other New Testament Scriptures. Concerning the early believers we read *" They continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. (Acts 2:42)* My If you have left your first love get back to the basics. Get back to Bible study. Get back into the fellowship. Get back to worship at the Lord's Table. Get back on your knees in prayer for it is these spiritual disciplines that lead us back to full love for Christ. The Risen Lord says, if we do not *Remember, Repent, and Repeat, there will be Removal. " I will come unto thee quickly and will remove thy candlestick out of his place." (2:5)* This is not the Second Coming, but the Lords coming in judgment to this church. If there is no Love, there will no Light. The reason for the church's existence has vanished, and Christ will say, *" Turn out the lights, the party's over."*

History records the sad fact that Christ did indeed later remove the lamp-stand of the church in Ephesus. It has been gone for centuries, smothered by the Moslems. Today

there is no local church within miles of Ephesus. What is the home where love has died ? What's the church where love has died ? Its just a beautiful building with expensive furnishings. Are there not many places like that today ? But the Lamp-stand has been removed for no ray of light ever radiates from that place. It has no *Light* because it has no *Love*. Without *first love* we can have Activity, Orthodoxy, and Purity but there'll be no light shining from our churches. *Removal* instead of *Revival*. What about you personally ? (2:7) If the entire church would not respond the hope is that individuals would. When Adam fell he lost access to the Tree of life. Here's a fallen church, it has lost the paradise of bliss which comes from walking with God. My the Risen Lord's call is a personal one. Its for every believer. Notice the singular. "*He, him.*"

Have you left your "*first love,*" ? Have you become too busy to spend time with Him ? Are you too active ? Too distant ? Too cold ? Too impersonal ?

Do you need to take decisive steps to be alone with the Lord ? Will you take those steps right

now ? For the first mark of a true and living church is love, and the supreme characteristic of a Christian is love for His Lord and God.

(Matt 10:37-38 22:37-38)

As the Risen Lord comes near this there is but one question that He is asking, "*Lovest thou Me ?*"

(21:17) Do you love Him ? Are you able to look up into his blessed face and say, "*Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love thee.*"

***" Lord it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint
But I love Thee, I adore
Oh, for grace to love Thee more."***