

Place: Lurgan Baptist 1:8:2010

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE LUKEWARM

Reading: Revelation 2:1-7

EPHESUS, THE FORMAL CHURCH

*How many of you have ever visited the magnificent ruins of the city of Ephesus ? Its well worth a visit and last September (2009) I had the privilege of seeing around what is left of this ancient city located near the Turkish town of Kusadasi. To say I was impressed is an understatement. The grandeur, the structure, the architecture is amazing. It will not surprise you then when I tell you that in John's day its citizens liked to call Ephesus, " **The Metropolis of Asia.**" The city of Ephesus was an inland city three miles from the sea, but the broad mouth of the Cayster River allowed access and provided the greatest harbour in Asia Minor.*

*Four great trade roads went through Ephesus, therefore it became known as the gateway to Asia. This was a prosperous business centre for it was located on the trade route from Rome to the East. 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 long as two football fields.**

With Temple worship there came not only idolatry but immorality. Small wonder businessmen travelled the four major roadways to Ephesus. They came flocking

into the Temple to have 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 temple 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 that midst of that godless city, that God planted a church. Paul laboured there for three years (Acts Ch's 19-20) Timothy also ministered there (1 Tim 1:3) and according to an early tradition, the apostle John replaced Timothy toward the end of the first century. This church had enjoyed the labours of gifted and godly 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 where the "*stars,*" where He pleased.

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. " Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your 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. So I want to preach to you about " **Ephesus, The Formal***

Church.”

(1) The Demanding Life of this Church: Thrilling

Now it is clear that when Christ speaks to each individual church He draws frequently upon the description of the Son of Man in (Ch 1) Did you notice how He addresses this church ? Can you see,

His ABILITY: " *He holdeth the seven stars in his right hand,*" (2:1) In (Ch 1) He Has the stars, but in (Ch 2) He holds the stars. The right hand speaks of power and honour. (Ps 110:1) The word " *hold,*" indicates keeping all of something in one's hand. We are protected, surrounded and encompassed by Christ's care.

His ACTIVITY: " *He walketh*," He is constantly taking stock of His churches. How challenging, for every detail of this church is known to Him.

His AUTHORITY: " In the midst" He is always in the midst. " *Where two or three*,"

His APPRAISAL: " *I know*," In each church His message is introduced with the same words. It speaks of full and complete knowledge. The One who walks in the midst of the lampstands is fully aware of all that concerns each church, their attitude, activities and associations. Now what did Christ know about Ephesus. *What was so thrilling about the demanding life of this assembly ?* For demanding it was. You see, you couldn't be a member here and not pull your weight. Well, look at this church, for one thing,

(a) IT WAS STANDING UP TO THE TASK:

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 all out to serve the Lord until they were all in. There was a woman in our Lord's day of whom He reported, " she hath done what she could." (Mk 14:8) Have you ? Two American business men were highly amused during a visit to Korea to see a young farmer pulling a plough, guided by his father. Laughing they said, " What a sight. We must take a picture of them and show the people back home." Hearing their laughter a missionary said, " the father

and son are Christians and are very poor. When they learned they were building a church they were grieved that they had no money to give. So they sold their only ox and gave the money to their church for a new building, and now they are taking turns pulling the plough. Would you laboured for the Lord as they laboured ? Is this church " a veritable beehive of industry ?" Is it a body that worships on the first day of the week and works the rest of the week ? It is estimated that in the average church 20% of the congregation will give 80% of the time, talent, money necessary to carry on the work of the church. How busy are you in Christian service ? How often are you in church ? More than three or four times each week ?

Would Christ say to you, what He said to the believers at Ephesus ? *" I know your hard work, your perseverance, your stickability."* Do you think that the Lord doesn't know all you are doing for Him ? Do you think He doesn't see your work behind the scenes, in the kitchen, in the crèche, in the studio upstairs, in the home, where no one thanks or encourages you because no one even notices what you do ? While others get the acclaim, the attention, and the awards, Christ says, *" I've noticed. I know. Thank you for all you are seeking to do in My name."* (a)

(b) IT WAS STANDING UP FOR THE TRUTH:

Morally they were Strict: The Lord says, *" 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 members 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 were serious about their walk with Christ. **Doctrinally they were Sound:** For 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 give 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)

But 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) My in a day when churches are built on theological jelly are we standing up for the truth ? Or have we sacrificed doctrinal purity on the altar of theological tolerance ? (a) (b)

(c) *IT WAS STANDING UP IN THE TEST:*

For the Lord continues to commend them in (2:3) The word “*patience,*” means “*endurance under trial.*” For these Ephesian believers, it was not easy being Christians. They found themselves exposed to fierce opposition. Yet since its founding, this church had remained faithful to the Lord and the Word. Even their motives were right. They did not give up, bail out, or fall back. Probably no book has had greater influence on the church apart from the Bible as John Bunyan’s **Pilgrims Progress**. It was written while Bunyan was a prisoner in Bedford jail. He was preaching to a crowd in the open air when officers broke up the meeting and carried him to jail. His crime was simply preaching without a licence. He spent the next 13 years in jail. When his trial came up, he was given a sentence of three months. After that time, he was told if he would promise never to preach again, they would release him. Bunyan replied, “*If I were out of prison today, I would preach again tomorrow, so help me God.*”

Is this the kind of patience and endurance that you possess ? My how easy we let things get us down in life. The least amount of persecution and difficulty we’re ready to call it quits. We need a faith that will endure under trial. Now, would you not like to have

been a member in Ephesus ? I mean this place was hopping. (a) (b) (c) What could possibly be wrong ?

Plenty. For notice not only (1)

(2) *The Dying Love of this Church: Troubling*

Do you see how abruptly the Lord changes the tone of this letter ? He puts his finger on the one glaring deficiency in this assembly that threatened to ruin everything. “*Nevertheless ... love.*” (2:4) In the original the word “*somewhat,*” is missing. “*Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*” 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. 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) Think of,

(a) *THIS CHURCH AND HER PAST DEVOTION:*

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. Indeed Paul ended that

letter with a special prayer for all those who “*love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.*” (Eph 6:24) The word “*sincerity,*” speaks of “*an undying love.*” Paul’s charge was to let nothing cool their love for Christ. 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) Thirty years have passed and their love was ebbing. Do you remember being preoccupied with thoughts of Christ ? Do you recall when your devotional times were never long enough ? Do you remember when the thought of Him provoked a fervent response in your heart ? Why, you couldn’t wait to sit at the Lord’s Table, or stand up and say thanks. Have things changed ? (a)

**(b) THIS CHURCH AND HER PRESENT
DECLINE:**

For the Lord says “*Thou art fallen,*” (2:5) Is this you ? Have you fallen in your usefulness to God ? Have you fallen in your testimony before others ? Have you fallen in the effectiveness of your witness ? Have you fallen away from a love relationship with Christ ? Does the Risen Lord say to you this “*I have somewhat love ?*” Interestingly enough this church was located in a city which was the chief port of Asia Minor. Its harbour was given too 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. ***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.

“*First love,*” is that which was evident in Israel towards Jehovah in the days immediately following their redemption from Israel. Jeremiah puts it forcefully in unforgettable language, “*I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.*” (Jer 2:2) Is this not a picture of our love for the Saviour in the days immediately following our conversion ? 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.

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. The honeymoon was over. The glow was gone. Then disaster struck. Is that what has happened to you spiritually ? Do you recall how it used to be ? Daily, you measured your spiritual progress. Regularly you met in expectation of His Word. Continually, you were happy to do His bidding, Weekly, you loved to join in worship. **But that was then. What about now ?** Has your work for Christ taken the place of your worship of Christ ? Are you 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,*” (a) (b)

(c) THIS CHURCH AND HER PRIMARY DUTY:

Love. Hudson Taylor said “ ***the primary qualification for a missionary is not love for souls but love for Christ.***” Do you recall what the Lord Jesus Himself said ? “ *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.* ” (Matt 22:27-28) Tell me, according to the Risen Lord what’s the first mark of a living church ? Love. How can it be restored ? What if it’s not ? (1) (2)

(3) The Devastating Loss of this Church: Threatening

Are you listening ? Apparently the Ephesian Christians were not. The result ? Their testimony in Asia has been completely erased. History tells us that when the

church at Ephesus received this letter it rallied for a while, but then it lapsed again. Christ removed the lampstand, its been gone for centuries, smothered by the Muslims. My have we grasped the significance of the Lord’s warning in (2:5) “ *Repent or else* ?” I mean, how can we avoid the Lord’s coming in judgment to this church ? By,

(a) Listening to the Commands He Declares:

There were three things Christ commanded them to do. They were to,

(1) Consider their Former Devotion:

“ *Remember ...fallen.*” (2:5) The word “ *remember,*” means “ *to keep on remembering.*” My ... remember how it used to be in your life. 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 for the Word ? Do you remember when you loved your fellow-believers ? 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 ? My the road back to Christ begins by first remembering. Memory is the handmaid of revival.

(2) Confess their Fateful Decline:

“ *And 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. Jim Allen in his commentary suggests that it's not merely that an emotion has faded, but that a person has been forsaken. He Himself as the head of the assembly has been replaced with another. (Jer 2:13) Do you recall that it was said of Solomon, " *And Solomon loved the Lord.*" (1 Kings 3:3) Later the charge is made, " *But King Solomon loved many strange women.*" (1 Kings 11:1) The Lord had been displaced in the affections of Solomon. Has this happened to you ? My its not that you don't have a first love anymore. It's that you have a new first love. It's no longer Christ. 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 ? Say, " *Lord my heart has been at a distance from You. But Lord I want the passion for You back in my life.*" (a) (b)

(3) Change their Future Direction:

" *Do the first works.*" (2:5) In other words, 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. My there's a principle here that we must never forget. *Our love for Christ is far more important to Him than all of our service to Him.* How we can avoid the lampstand being removed ? (a)

(b) Looking at the Consequences He Describes:

For the Risen Lord says if we do not remember, repent,

and repeat, there will be removal. " *Or else,*" Today, there is no church within miles of Ephesus. My ... do we not all know of places where the " *candlestick,*" has been removed ? You see, if there is no love, there will be no light, and the reason for the church's existence will have gone. My ... without first love we can have activity, purity, orthodoxy, but there'll be no light shining from this church. **Removal instead of Revival.** What about you personally ? For the Risen Lord says in (2:7)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. It's 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 ? (Matt 10:37-38)

Napoleon had a number of select soldiers. He called them the Old Guard. They loved him and were loyal to him. But it was discovered that one day they didn't have the love for him they once had. *He called the Old Guard to the courtyard.* Each one wondered what would happen. Would it mean punishment, or death ? Suddenly a messenger appeared and summoned the members of the Old Guard into the presence of Napoleon one by one. The first soldier walked in. The door was closed. The world was shut out. He walked to the throne and stood face to face with the Emperor.

Napoleon looked into the eyes of his chief, stretched forth his hand, and gripped his hand and the chief went out. One by one the soldiers came in, looked into the face of Napoleon, clasped hands, and walked out. The rebellion and coldness was over. *My will you come just now into the presence of the Lord Jesus ? Will you look into His face ? Will you place your hand into His nailed scarred hand ? Will you go forth with His touch throbbing not only in your hand, but in your heart ?*