

2. Lights shining in the darkness

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[0 : 00] Now, before we look together at Revelation 2 and 3, we'll have a moment of prayer. Lord Christ, who walks among the lampstands, who holds the stars in your hand, and who sends the Holy Spirit, we pray that that gracious Spirit now will indeed speak into our hearts, so we'll indeed hear what he is saying to us, what he is saying to the churches at this day in the 21st century, and we ask this in his name. Amen.

And if we could have our Bibles open at Revelation 2 and 3, because I'm trying to do an overview, I'll be jumping about a bit in the chapters, but I hope that's quite clear.

Some years ago, John Stott wrote a book on these chapters called, *What Christ Thinks of the Church*. And it really is far more important than what anyone else thinks of the church, is it not? Lots of people have comments to make, favourable and unfavourable, but in the end, only one opinion matters, and that is what Christ thinks of the church.

So we're going to be looking at these chapters, lights shining in the darkness, seven lamps in Roman Asia. You can see on the map there, Patmos down in the bottom left-hand corner, and then Ephesus and Smyrna and the others, probably a circular route.

[1 : 29] The messenger would land in Ephesus, then go north to Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, and begin to turn round and return back to the coast near Laodicea.

So that's probably the reason for the order. As you can imagine, all sorts of people have thought other fantastic and very often unbelievable ideas why that order should be.

But I think the reason is a fairly straightforward and practical one, a fairly simple one. And you can't often say that about the book of Revelation. But this is a fairly simple and straightforward reason. The seven churches, which John the aged apostle probably had particular responsibility for. Now, what is happening here in these two chapters?

What are they about? Now, there are some commentators seeing them, a preview of church history throughout the centuries, beginning with Ephesus and then going throughout church history and up to Laodicea.

[2 : 32] I think that's not possible for at least two reasons. One is that no commentators can agree on which period of history corresponds to which church.

And very often they show their own churchmanship and their own prejudices when they try to fit them in. The other problem is, if this is a preview, we've got to decide where we are.

And all those people who argue it's a preview argue we are in the seventh church in Laodicea. Now, indeed, there is plenty of Laodicea around. There is plenty of apathy, plenty of discontent, all these sorts of things.

And yet, it's impossible to say that the entire church across the world is Laodicea. And the other problem is that such commentators totally ignore the church outside Britain and America.

No interest at all in the growing, vibrant churches of the developing world. So I think we can set that aside. What I want to say is this. First of all, they are the seven literal churches you saw on the map.

[3 : 39] And the actual cities and actual churches towards the end of the first century, the first Christian century, to which the apostle is writing. But also, as I said last week, in apocalyptic writing like Revelation 7, is the number of completeness.

And while it's not a preview of church history throughout the ages, nevertheless, it does refer to every church throughout the ages. It refers to us as much as it did to ancient Ephesus or Smyrna. And indeed, it will continue to apply until the Lord returns. And all over the world, you will find churches which are like these churches. Sometimes even within the same church, the same denomination, you can find examples of these kinds of churches.

And the other thing is, if you listened as we were reading, he who was anear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. In other words, each church has to hear what the other churches are being told.

Like the three musketeers, each for all and all for each. It's the whole church is being addressed, and the whole church needs to hear the message. And the structure is very straightforward.

[4 : 56] The Lord addresses the angel of the church. He commends and he condemns. There are things he praises, things he rebukes.

He makes an appeal, and there is a promise. That's the structure. So let's look, first of all, at verse 1, and then we'll try and have an overview of what these chapters are saying.

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. These introductions of the risen Lord are all taken from the opening vision in chapter 1, and this is the most basic one.

He holds the churches. That's to say he's the supreme authority. They belong to him. They're in his hand. That's what a church is.

Not because it's on the books of a denomination or prides itself in its independence. The point is, Christ holds the churches in his hand.

[5 : 57] He is the Lord, the head of the church. But also notice, he walks among the churches. It's not a static thing. Be still for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here.

We sang that a moment or two ago. It's not a static thing. He walks among, and walks in Scripture often refers to the whole way of life, to a developing experience.

What makes a gathering of people a church? Not the notice board. It's not the denomination. It's not the building. It's not the organisation.

One thing and one thing alone makes a gathering of people a church, and that is that the risen Lord is present by his Spirit. It's not our church. It's his church, and it's his approval which counts.

Now that's by way of introduction. He holds the church. He governs it by his word and by his Spirit. He plants and he removes, and he walks among us. Now I want to say three things about this overall message.

[7 : 08] I want first of all to look at the commendations that Christ gives to the churches. People need to be encouraged. It's tough.

It's difficult. Whether you're persecuted or not, there are tough things and evil things that come into our lives which need perseverance, and we need to be encouraged.

And Christ commends these churches for certain things, which tell us what he wants to see in his church all the time. Isn't that true? First of all, he commends them for true teaching.

Verse 2 of chapter 2. 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 them apostles and are not, and have found them to be false.

In his first letter, John the Apostle had said, test the spirits to see whether they are of God. Don't just take people at face value. Listen to what they're saying.

[8 : 10] Is it true? Is it godly? Is it biblical? And you'll notice that later on, verse 6, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans. Now, the Nicolaitans are obviously a group of people around in the first century.

They are nowhere defined. But almost certainly, they were a group of people who wanted to water down the gospel, make it simply a neckle of the spirit of the age.

The point is, false teaching destroys the church, whereas true teaching leads to the growth of the church. That's why the church is commended for true teaching.

And again, in Philadelphia, you have kept my word and have not denied my name. You know how the two things go together? Keeping the word and not denying the name.

We can be very, very dubious of those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, but do not have the slightest regard for what he has said. Remember Jesus said in Mark, whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, when the Son of Man returns, he will be ashamed of him.

[9 : 19] So, the first mark of a true church is true teaching. Is it biblical? Is it leading to the growth of the church? Second commendation, I'm not necessarily doing this in chronological order, is firmness in trouble.

And that's particularly true of the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum. That's verses 8 to 11, still in chapter 2, and verses 12 to 17.

These two churches are particularly suffering persecution. Now, let me say a word about persecution. There's a great deal of controversy among the commentators how much persecution was actually happening.

If I was right in saying last week, this probably comes from the very end of the first century and the emperor Domitian launched a savage persecution throughout the empire, then obviously there's a great deal of persecution.

That doesn't mean that every single Christian or every single church is being persecuted. It meant there was a time of danger. You see, for example, you could imagine a province where the governor perhaps was married to a Christian wife and therefore moderated the persecution and so on.

[10:32] But if you were a Christian, you were in danger of persecution. And in particular, in Smyrna and Pergamum, I want you to look at two things. Verse 9, the synagogue of Satan.

And then in verse 13 in Pergamum, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. The origin of the persecution is identified here.

It is the devil himself who wishes to destroy the church, to destroy the gospel. And later on, as we come to the middle chapters of Revelation, we'll see this even more fully.

But probably as a particular thing referred to here, the Emperor Domitian established what was called the Emperor Cult, which meant, in fact, that every citizen in the empire had to acknowledge that Domitian was a god.

Had to say the word, Caesar is Lord. Didn't have to actually do anything very much. Probably what happened is most people would have to go to the pagan temple once a year, say the word, Caesar is Lord, and then be given a kind of certificate for the rest of the year.

[11:45] Now you see immediately how that runs headlong into the Christian gospel. No community of people who say that Jesus is Lord.

No community of people who, like John, believe that he is the living one and has the keys of death and of the world to come. These people could not say the word, Caesar is Lord.

And these churches have commended for their firmness under pressure. You have not denied my name, not denied my faith.

Chapter 13, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is, yet you hold fast my name and did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness.

The word witness there is the Greek word, *martus*, from which you get the word, martyr. And already, by the end of the first century, this word is coming to meaning. Not only somebody who's a witness, but somebody who suffers for it.

[12:44] So as the risen Lord commends the church, he says, as I look to the church, I'm looking to see true teaching. As I look to the church, I'm looking for firmness and under pressure.

But the third thing that's commended is progress. The church going on with the Lord. Especially in Thyatira, in chapter 2, verse 19, I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

You see, we cannot stand still in our Christian life. And it's interesting, true teaching, unless it's a living and breathing and growing thing, can fossilise into traditionalism.

That's what had happened in Ephesus, almost certainly. Faithful, rigid, but no longer any life. Can't be static. We can't just keep out trotting the old cliches and, otherwise, we end up in a dead traditionalism.

And as often been said, tradition is the dead faith of the living, whereas traditionalism is the living faith, sorry, yes, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living, whereas tradition is the living faith of the dead.

[14:05] We mustn't distinguish, we mustn't distinguish these. And also, firmness can become stubbornness. A standing firm for the gospel can sometimes be reduced to what's been caricatured as there's only two of us left now in our church, my wife and myself, and I'm not sure about her.

Now, that has happened in churches which are once living, vigorous, faithful churches. And that leads on to the other thing that the Lord Jesus recommends, which is vigorous outreach.

True teaching, firmness in trouble, progress in vigorous outreach. This is especially true of the church in Philadelphia. Chapter 3, verse 7, down to verse 13.

Verse 8, I know your works, I've set this for you, an open door. Philadelphia was founded as a missionary city itself, a missionary city of Greek culture and lifestyle, to show to people what it was

like to be a Greek and to advocate that lifestyle.

Now, what the risen Lord is saying is, I want the Christians in Philadelphia to be missionaries for the gospel, to spread the eternal gospel and its lifestyle.

[15:24] And the open door, you may remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 16, a wide door for effective work has opened for me and there are many who oppose.

That and is very significant. Almost all of us have written but. But the and is significant the wide door for open work almost inevitably means the opposition that comes.

So there is encouragement. But just one thing before we leave that. When there is encouragement given, that is not to produce complacency but it's a call to overcome.

Even in Philadelphia, look at chapter 3 verse 12. The one who conquers, the one who overcomes, if you like, the one who perseveres to the end, even in Philadelphia, with all its vibrancy, there was still a need to overcome, to persevere.

So the risen Lord comes to the church with commendations. But secondly, the risen Lord comes to the church with rebukes. Now we all need encouragement.

[16:33] But we also need warnings and rebukes. Otherwise, we become complacent. Now remember, this is not a checklist. It's not, we're not to sit and say, oh we've got this, we've got that, we're not so good at this, we're not so good at that.

That's the kind of things that presbyteries do, send around checklists which you've got to tick and see how effectively you're performing. This is, this is whole.

One, the gospel is one gospel. It's not so much you, as I say, you tick off the list, you look at the whole picture because Christ is one, the gospel is one.

And there are one or two things here. What does Christ rebuke? The first thing he rebukes is the decline of love. Back to Ephesus, chapter 2, verse 4. I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Verse 5, remember, not live in the past, but revisit the past where that love sprung up. when I'm talking to young couples who are preparing for marriage, one of the things I always say is, when you get into real difficulties, as you will, from time to time, when things seem to go wrong, concentrate then on what attracted you to each other in the first place.

[17:57] Revisit the springtime of your love and ask yourself if that's something you're willing to give up and abandon. Put things right. Do something about it.

And that's what the risen Lord is saying to the church. Do something about it. Don't just feel good. Don't just feel emotional. Do something about it. Love first for Christ and then for others.

You do not have the love. And remember, Ephesus was orthodox. True teaching was there, godly doctrine. But the candlestick was to be removed because he had no love.

That's why I say it's not a checklist. We can't pick and choose. Sooner or later, if we try and take one stone out of the edifice, the whole thing falls down. Second thing the risen Lord condemns is false teaching.

Just as he commends true teaching, he commends false teaching. Chapter 2 verse 6, Ephesus is commended for hating the works of the Nicolaitans.

[19:03] But notice a few verses down the chapter, verse 14, the church at Pergamum. That's the church we saw which is so warmly commended for its firmness, for its strength, for its standing up to persecution, for its resisting Satan.

Verse 14, I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel so that they might eat food, sacrifice to idols, and practice sexual immorality.

So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So you see the danger. And once again down the church in Thyatira, that was the church we saw Christ commends for its progress. Look at verse 20. I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food, sacrifice to idols.

The mention of Jezebel is enormously significant. Jezebel, Ahab's queen back in the books of kings who wanted to drive out the worship of the Lord and set up in its place the worship Phoenician god Baal.

[20:21] Well all that it meant that Baal was worshipped with orgies, with licentiousness and you can see what's happening here. The church throughout the ages has always been in danger of

giving people what they want.

Hedonism, enjoying yourself without responsibility. In the documents that have been unearthed by archaeologists about the old Canaanite civilization, you get all these stories about the gods. There are no Ten Commandments there. It's simply a lifestyle which you can indulge in without any kind of responsibility. And there's a weariness here.

You can sense the risen Lord is weary as he looks at his church. On the other hand, there's the whole paraphernalia of churchiness often, isn't there? The do-gooding which wants to win God's favor.

And the whole religiosity, which is a million miles away from the true gospel. And the ungodly living, a gospel without the cross.

[21 : 30] Look at verse 24. To the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold to this teaching, that's the false teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan.

Now, you can be pretty certain that those people in Thyatira did not call their teaching the deep things of Satan. They very probably called them the deep things of God. They were probably saying to people, there is an elite, there is secret knowledge which the ordinary punters don't know. And they were calling people to allegedly a deeper experience, but in fact, it was an experience which destroyed the church. If you look at the history of liberalism and the kind of preaching it produces, it empties the churches.

Those doctrines which are supposed to be so liberating, what do they do? They simply empty the churches, because, after all, if preachers are simply saying you can do what you like anyway, why bother?

Why bother coming to hear that? I mean, our own sinful hearts tell us that. We don't need to come and have it said to us. So, you see, false teaching ultimately destroys the church.

[22 : 42] So, the Lord Jesus condemns them for the decline of love. He condemns them for false teaching. There's a third thing. There is a deadening apathy which the risen Lord sees in, particularly in two of the churches.

A black hole which sucks everything in. Look at chapter 3, verse 1. And to the angel of the church in Sardis, write, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Now, wouldn't it be easy if we could say, oh, that's one of those liberal churches that are dying, nothing happening? That's clearly not the case. You have a reputation of being alive. This church is what today would be called an evangelical church, a reputation of being alive.

Sardis was the ancient capital of the province of Lydia. Now its great days were in the past. And there is here the danger of nominalism.

[23 : 51] This is the problem at Sardis. They've inherited a great tradition, no doubt. They've inherited wonderful things, and yet they just don't care.

remember verse 3, what you received and heard, keep it and repent. Notice that the keep it is contrasted with heard, but actually they've forgotten what they've heard.

They're probably able to parrot it. They're probably able to tell you exactly what those preachers who came to them and preached the words said, but they're not keeping it, and they're not waking up. You see, it's the gospel which grows churches in the first place.

Why do churches die? They die, well, some churches of course, die because there's too many buildings in the wrong places, as they're coming from, often in Scotland particularly, coming from rival groups, building enormous buildings across the streets from each other.

But setting that aside, why do churches die? They die ultimately because they are cut off from the risen Lord. They no longer care. And the words of one Samuel Echiabod, where is the glory?

[25 : 02] Your glory is gone. It can be written over them. But if you turn over now to chapter 3 and to the church in Laodicea. I will spit you out of my mouth.

Authorised version, I will spew you out of my mouth. And spit is actually rather delicate. The word is vomit. And it picks up, of course, from Leviticus, where the Lord says, if you disobey my word in the land, the land will vomit you out.

That's the thought here. And you're lukewarm. You're neither hot nor cold. Now you would think that Laodicea would have dreadful heresies.

You would think they were giving house room to false teachers who were drawing away disciples after themselves. You would think that Laodicea was full of great immorality and was a scandal.

You'd think that Laodicea had great personality conflicts. You know, there's not a word of any of these things in the message to Laodicea. And in Laodicea, there were none of these things because there wasn't enough life in Laodicea or such roots to take, to take, grow down and grow up.

[26 : 28] There wasn't enough life. What's particularly interesting is verse 15. Would that you were either cold or hot. Now you can understand the risen Lord saying, I wish you were hot.

In other words, I wish you were on fire for my glory and filled with my spirit. But why cold? I think the reason is this. If a person is cold and dead or a community is cold and dead, the living word can waken them up.

The living word can come right into that deadness and can change it into life. But if there is self-sufficiency, congratulation, a lukewarm complacency, then that is absolutely deadly.

Because such people make themselves incapable of listening to the word, make it impossible for that living word to penetrate. great. But notice one thing as well.

I said that when I was looking at the commendations, in Philadelphia, vibrant church as it was, the risen Lord says, the one who overcomes, the one who perseveres.

[27 : 35] In Sardis and in Laodicea, the risen Lord says exactly the same thing. In other words, even if you're in Laodicea or Sardis, it's still possible to persevere and to overcome.

So the commendations, the rebukes, and thirdly and very briefly, the rewards. To each of these churches, a reward is promised to those who persevere.

Ultimately, that reward is of course Christ himself. In chapter 22, verse 4, his servants will serve him and they will see his face.

That is the ultimate reward. And there are a number of pictures, however, of that reward. I just want to mention two of them briefly. First of all, the very first one mentioned, chapter 2, verse 7, the word to Ephesus, to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.

In other words, this person will grow and flourish in the new creation. Back in Psalm 1, the one who, the just, the godly person is like someone growing by the rivers of water, like a tree which flourishes.

[28 : 50] And the Lord Jesus Christ is saying, this will be eternal. Through all eternity, you will fulfil the purpose of which you were made. And that is the point of God's creation.

That's the point of the word good in the creation story. Good means something God created to be. So, the Lord Jesus Christ is saying to the, and not just in Ephesus, but in any church, you will eat of the tree of life and the paradise of God.

And then, briefly, the last promise to Laodicea. The promise to Laodicea is staggering because the conditions are so dreadful. Chapter 3, verse 21, the one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered, and sat down with my father on his throne.

Now, you can imagine somebody in Laodicea, some faithful, godly Christian who is really depressed and disillusioned by the state in the church. Nowadays, we can travel, of course, in this world of easy, instant travel.

In the ancient world, it must have been very difficult for people to have travelled anywhere other than somewhere in their immediate vicinity. And you see what the risen Lord, the risen Lord is saying, you've got it tough.

[30 : 13] I know what it's like. Well, this phrase, I know, this almost sums up everything in the chapters, I know. Everything about this situation about you, I know.

And he's inviting these Christians, these persecuted, harassed Christians, as he's inviting persecuted and harassed Christians today, to remember that he himself overcame.

In the, through the cross, through the suffering, through the reviling and through the ill treatment, as I conquered and sat down with my father on his throne.

And that surely is the ultimate reward. Better than any plod that's given now, better than any posturing now, better than any reputation now. Those who suffer with Christ, he says, will reign with him.

The commendations, the condemnations, and the rewards. And as we finish, this is calling us, is it not, to persevere, to be those who overcome.

[31 : 20] Overcome not necessarily in spectacular battles, although sometimes these battles will come, but overcome in the grey routines of every day, in the problems of ordinary living.

So brothers and sisters, let's persevere, let's love the Lord, let's be faithful to him, and let's finish the race. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we know that as you walk in the midst of St.

George's Tron, you see deep into our hearts, both our individual hearts and the hearts, as it were, of the family of God here. We know that nothing is hidden from your eyes, and how we praise you for your commendations and your encouragements, how we tremble at your rebukes, how we look forward to the rewards.

So help us to persevere, to run the race, looking to Jesus, who himself ran that race and is now seated at the right hand of God. We ask this in his name.

Amen.