

Leaving our first love

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome you to this new series of Lunchtime Bible Talks. Over the next five weeks, we are doing a short series on the seven churches in the book of Revelation.

This actually follows on rather well from what Terry has been doing in the last three weeks, if you've been here. Terry was looking at the three letters of John.

John lived on much longer than the other apostles, probably some 30 years longer than Paul and Peter. And probably in his old age, he wrote the gospel, the three letters, and then this book of Revelation that we are going to be looking at.

We are going to be looking at the seven churches since there's five weeks. The arithmetic doesn't quite work. So some of the churches will have to make do with half a time, rather than, to use a phrase from Revelation itself, a time, times, and half a time.

So it's not any prejudice against the churches. It's simply that we don't have the time. So we're going to begin, as always, by reading our passage.

[1 : 11] We want to look at the church in Ephesus today, which is chapter 2, 1 to 7. But I want to begin at chapter 1, verse 9, which is the original revelation the apostle John has on the island of Patmos, when the risen Lord comes to him and asks him to write this book, the letter.

Remember, the whole book of Revelation is the letter to the seven churches. Anyway, Revelation chapter 1, verse 8, that's on page 1028.

And verse 9, I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, And on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

[2 : 41] The hairs of his head were white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace.

And his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.

And his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, Fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one.

I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, And the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars, are the angels of the seven churches, And the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

[3 : 46] 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 works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, Which is in the paradise of God. Amen, and may God bless that reading to us. Now let's pray.

[5 : 00] Thank you. Lord God, we thank you for those people, To whom came the early revelation, The apostles and the prophets.

To whom the Holy Spirit committed, The living word of the living God. Whom the Spirit inspired to write these words, whom the Spirit taught to the message that he wanted to be passed on all through the generations.

And we thank you that by the gracious ministry of that same Spirit, we have the complete canon of Scripture in our hands. And so help us, Lord. Help us to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Help us to understand at least something of the riches of this great book, which is not just the last book in the Bible, but the very completion of what you have to say to us, a book that points to the triumph of the Lamb and to the new creation.

And so, Lord, we pray that as we look at this passage together, now and in the following weeks, that you will indeed throw light on this passage and lead us to Christ, the first word and the last word, who is the great subject of this book, as he is of the whole of the Scriptures.

[6 : 20] We ask this in his name. Amen. Many people think the book of Revelation is like a Rubik's Cube, which you have to show your ingenuity if you're going to decipher it.

Too many people, as well, use this to peddle a particular theory of the future, a particular program of events leading up to the coming of Christ. Now, since we're looking only at this limited section, we're not going to be going into all that.

But I think it's very important that we realize that this book is given to help us to live our lives in this world. It's not primarily given us a roadmap of the future, although it does tell us what will happen in the future.

It's primarily so that we can live in this world, so that we can hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Nostalgia is a wonderful thing, and most of us love wallowing in it.

Particularly when we think about Christian things. Oh, wasn't it wonderful in the old days? Those golden days of the Billy Graham campaigns back in the 1950s, which many of you will probably remember.

[7 : 35] Going back further, still the days of the Covenanters. I don't think anyone here is old enough to remember that. Or the Wesleyan Methodist revivals in the 18th century.

Now, these were all great works of God. There's no doubt about it, and I'm not denigrating them at all. The one place, though, we cannot live is in the past.

We need to live in the present as we look to the future. And when we look to the past, we need to gain inspiration. We need to gain warning.

We need to gain challenge. And if there ever was a golden age of church history, it most certainly was not the end of the first century, if we read these carefully.

The seven churches in Asia, what we call Turkey, Western Turkey, probably a group of churches which the Apostle John was responsible for.

[8 : 31] Remember, we are still in the apostolic age while John is still alive, and forms of church government, local government in the churches, have not yet properly evolved.

It's probably a group of churches for which the Apostle, who lived for a lot of his later years in Ephesus, was responsible. And probably a messenger would go around coming ashore at Ephesus, then cutting inland, and then coming back near to the coast of Laodicea.

I don't think there's any magical or mystical significance in the order. I think it's the order in which a messenger would deliver them. Nor is it true to say that this is a coded preview of the history of the church from then until the second coming, for a whole number of reasons.

First of all, because those who try to make that history limit the church almost exclusively to the church in the West and in America. They never have anything to say about the vibrant, growing churches in the developing world.

The other thing is, it means that since those people always say the Lord is going to come any moment, which is true in one sense, but the argument is, since he's going to come any moment, the entire church must be Laodicea.

[9 : 51] Now, there's plenty of Laodicea around. There's no doubt about that. Just as there's plenty of Laodicea in our hearts as well. No, this is not a coded preview.

These are seven actual churches which existed at the time. But they are also pictures of the whole church throughout the whole of its history.

Throughout the whole of the church's history, you'll find Ephesus and Laodicea. You'll find Sardis and Philadelphia and the other churches. Indeed, you'll find in any given church examples of the kind of behavior and belief and practice in these churches.

So that's what we're going to do. We're going to look at each of these churches and ask, what is the Spirit saying? What did he first say to them? And what's he saying to us? Remember, the whole book is the letter to the churches.

These are really individual notes, like the kind of thing we so often do at Christmas. You'll send your circular letter, and to particular friends you'll append notes about your cat or great-aunt Mildred or something like that, of particular interest.

[10 : 58] So, in other words, all of these letters were to be read by each of the churches. Laodicea was to hear what was said to Ephesus. Thyatira was to hear what was said to Sardis.

So that's another reason for seeing this as a complete picture. The number seven in apocalyptic writing like Revelation and Daniel is the number of completeness, coming ultimately from the early chapters of the Bible, that six days of creation followed by the day of rest.

So here we have seven lamps in Roman Asia. And to each of these churches, the apostle, or rather the risen Lord through the apostle, addresses his message.

The structure is similar. We have the address to the angel of the church. We have comments on the church, praise and blame, although there is no blame for Philadelphia and Smyrna, and no praise for Laodicea.

But most of the church is a mixture of praise and blame. The call to hear and the reward to the one who hears and perseveres. Sometimes these last two are reversed.

[12 : 12] So let's look then at the church of Ephesus, leaving our first love. I think there's two major parts in these verses, one to seven.

First of all, who Christ is, and then what Christ says. That's the way we're going to look at. First of all, who Christ is. Now, the Lord introduces himself to each of the churches with elements drawn from the opening vision.

And in this particular one, it seems to me that Christ is coming as the one who is going to come to all the churches. First of all, he holds the seven stars.

He is the supreme authority in the church. He is the one whose word and spirit govern the church. He holds them.

That means a lot of things. It means he guides, he directs them. It also means he preserves them. He plants churches. He removes churches. Just as in Daniel, he sets up kings and removes kings.

[13 : 21] So he is the supreme authority in the church. He holds the church, the seven stars. That means he holds every church in his right hand. The others, he also walks among the churches.

That means his active presence in the church at any given time. What is the difference between a church and a gathering of people, even a gathering of people in a religious building?

What makes a church? What makes a church is that the risen Lord walks among them. The risen Lord doesn't just hold them. He's not just outside, as it were, holding. He is in the midst of the church.

He is the authority. So the church is not a building. It's not a denomination. It's not an organization. Nor is it our church.

I worry when I hear ministers talking about my church. Don't volunteer for the position of Messiah. There isn't a vacancy. It's not our church. It is his church.

[14 : 26] And in this first letter, I see the most basic facts about him and his relationship with his people are established. First of all, he is greater than the church because he holds it.

But secondly, he moves among it. And exactly the picture we have of God in the early chapters of the Bible. He is outside of creation, far greater than it.

But he comes down into creation to walk among it. And so it is with the church. His word is central. The words of him who holds the seven stars.

This is the word which the Spirit applies. Verse 7, Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. It's a Trinitarian idea. God the Father sends the living word, Christ Jesus, whom the Spirit reveals. And the Spirit reveals him through the written word. This is, in other words, a living church is going to have scripture at its heart. It's no accident that Revelation draws very heavily from the Old Testament.

[15:30] One of the reasons we find the book of Revelation difficult is not just because it is difficult, but because we don't know our Old Testaments well enough. Every phrase in this book echoes the Old Testament.

There are hardly any direct quotations, but every phrase echoes the earlier scriptures. His approval is what counts. I know.

There is an absolutely dreadful production, which some of you may well have seen, a guide to good churches. Rather like a guide to hotels.

And the compilers of this give stars to the churches. Not the kind of stars in Revelation, but the kind of stars you give to hotels. It's utterly appalling.

But it's hotels. How do we say hotels? Well, they are treated as if they were hotels. How good is the singing? How eloquent is the preaching? How good is the coffee?

[16:29] Well, I doubt many churches would do very well if that were the case. No offence to the people making coffee. Good. All these sorts of things.

Except the one thing. They don't appear to have asked any church, does the risen Lord walk among you? Is his spirit present? Because of course you can't get it. It's rather like that other abomination, the Times preaching competition, which is not, of course, a preaching competition at all, but a competition in public speaking.

I mean, have a preaching competition. It's rather like saying you can give stars to the Holy Spirit. The point is, it is Christ's approval, not the approval of the publishers of a guide to good churches. Having looked at that production, having looked at what was said in some of the churches, I happen to know a bit about. I don't think they've done the research very thoroughly. So, a church is, a true church is, the risen Lord walks in the midst.

He is honored, his word is preached and obeyed, and where the light is shining. That's the first thing then, who Christ is. Secondly, what Christ says to the church in Ephesus.

[17:42] Ephesus is an important commercial center, a busy cosmopolitan place, like so many of our cities today. We reenact 19 of how Paul and his companions brought the gospel to Ephesus, and the gospel there triumphed over ignorance, over witchcraft, over the worship of the goddess Diana.

And Paul, of course, much earlier, had written, had himself written the letter to the church in Ephesus. He had spent almost three years there, one of his longer stays, and that the gospel had penetrated into that citadel of darkness.

A slave girl had been rescued. People had been, demons had been expelled. And the power of the gospel in Ephesus was tremendous.

Now, this is some 30 years later. You have to remember. 30 years is a long time in the life of the church. And we are now, Paul, in fact, probably more than 30 years, Paul writing that letter, perhaps round about A.D. 60.

We're probably now almost in the early 90s. Anyway, Christ, first of all, has praise for the church. And what does he praise the church for? I know your works, versus to your toil and your patient endurance.

[19:03] Their hard work, their perseverance, like all hard work and perseverance, much of it unnoticed and unglamorous. And, of course, there's a great encouragement. The Lord knows about it.

Maybe people didn't notice it. Maybe people gave you no thanks. But the Lord knows. The one who sees and knows is the one who commends and who will one day give the only well done that matters.

I keep on saying that, give the only well done that matters, because like the rest of you, I so much like to hear human well done. But it is true. There is only one well done that ultimately matters.

Diligence in exposing false teaching. Verse 2, I've tested those who call themselves apostles and they're not and found them to be false. I know the people that Terry was talking about two weeks ago and he was expounding 2 John.

But that is what 2 John is about, exposing the fake, exposing the false. False teaching was sounded plausible. And then in verse 6, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans.

[20 : 07] We don't know who the Nicolaitans were. Some kind of heretical teacher. It's not especially important, because the point is that false teachers are influential because they always sound plausible and convincing.

They don't come wearing a t-shirt saying, I am a wolf. They come plausibly. They come like wolves in sheep's clothing, wearing their, well, sometimes literally wearing their fleeces.

But their teaching is false. So the risen Lord praises the church, your energy and effort in the gospel and your diligence in exposing false teaching.

But secondly, the Lord has words of condemnation. This church, so busy and orthodox, had a cancer eating away at its heart.

Verse 4, I have this against you. You have abandoned the love you had at first. Awfully easy to be active. Awfully easy to expose heresy.

[21 : 13] Awfully easy to say the right things. We can do all that in our own strength, after all. But something had caused the first glow of love to fade.

And I think, actually, I said, once again, if you think of 2nd, if you think of 3rd John, like Sherry was looking at last week, 2nd John is warning us against the fake.

3rd John is warning us against the kind of heresy hunting continually reduces the number of people you can listen to. Continually reduces the number of people who are sound and orthodox.

There's only two of us left now, the wife and me, and I'm not sure about her. That's the caricature of that, but sometimes it comes pretty near the truth. You get some of those churches that are dying of orthodoxy, dead, moribund, inward-looking, so, so orthodox that anyone who expresses something slightly different is instantly suspect.

And you see, you can see the danger. This church had become so adept at noting out heresy, they'd become so adept at detecting false teaching that they'd become censorious, critical, and legalistic.

[22 : 32] I will remove your lampstand, says the Lord. Why do churches die? Or sometimes they die because too many churches have been built. In the 19th century, far too many churches were built in Scotland after the split in the church.

Because of all these Scottish villages and towns, the enormous churches at the opposite sides of the street. which even in the height of Victorian church going could never have been filled.

Ultimately, churches die because the Lord removes the candlestick, the lampstand.

But you see, the Lord leaves the door open for yet this you have, verse 6. So what Christ says, praise, condemnation, and thirdly, promise.

I couldn't think of a word beginning with P for condemnation. Answers on a postcard. The promise. To the one who conquers, that's to say, to the one who perseveres to the end, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

To hear in biblical terms doesn't just mean being present when the words are spoken. It means obey. Hear, O Israel. Israel. Yahweh is your God. Yahweh is one.

[23 : 47] The spirit in the word calling to action. The one who conquers, the one who sticks it out. And that one will experience the restoration of Eden, the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Right back to the beginning of the story. Now, in that story at the beginning, we were barred from the tree of life, the flaming sword of God's judgment. However, because Christ has died and risen again, because he has sent his spirit, this is now available to us.

Fellowship with God in the present and immortality and true fellowship with him in the future.

Church at Ephesus, the danger to every church of leaving our first love.

Those of us who are older may look back with embarrassment at our rasher youth and brasher youth. I wonder if the Lord looks back on us at a time when we loved Jesus a bit more than we do now.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, help us indeed to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[24 : 57] Help us to realize that our only significance, our only effectiveness, is when the Lord who holds us in his hand walks in our midst. And when his Spirit is in us and enables us both to love him

and to obey him.

So bless the word to our hearts, Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.