

1. Lights Shining in the Darkness

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[0 : 0 0] Now, could we please have our Bibles open at Revelation 1 and 2, and we'll pray together and ask the Lord's help. Father, we know that when we approach your word, that no words of ours and no activity on the part of our minds and hearts can shed light on its pages.

And so we ask the help of your gracious Holy Spirit, the one who inspired the Scriptures, the one who gave us the Scriptures. We ask him now to come and open our hearts and our minds to your word, and to open your word to our minds and our hearts.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. I'm calling this series Lights Shining in the Darkness, Seven Lamps Shining in the Darkness of Roman Asia.

And the particular title for this morning is A Church in Danger. A group of American students at a theological seminary were making heavy weather of their study of the Book of Revelation.

Not the only people who have done so. It's often been a book that's been rather ignored or, at the other extreme, overemphasized and exaggerated.

[1 : 3 0] They were very glad when the class came to an end and they could go off to the gym to play basketball. And they really enjoyed their game, made all the better because of their fruitless efforts to understand the Book of Revelation.

After the game was over, as they were leaving the gym, they passed the old caretaker, Joe, who was reading a book. One of them said, Joe, what are you reading? He said, I'm reading the Book of Revelation.

Oh, you might possibly understand that, said they. He said, it's actually rather simple. Jesus wins. And that is what the Book of Revelation is about.

As we study these curious passages to the seven churches, and perhaps later on we'll pick up other parts of the book, don't ever forget that fundamental theme, that fundamental message of the book.

Jesus wins. Not just Jesus has won or Jesus will win, but Jesus wins. That really is my first point, and that's why I read chapter 1.

[2 : 3 8] The vision that controls this book is the Son of Man, this glorious figure, not Christ as he was, not even Christ as he will be, but Christ as he now is, as he walks in the midst of the seven churches.

The Lord not only of the church, but the Lord of time and eternity. Now this book almost certainly comes from very late in the first century.

The Apostle John, probably one of the last people on earth who had known Jesus in his earthly ministry, now exiled on the remote island of Petmos in the Aegean Sea, and he's given this glorious vision of the Lord of time and of eternity.

And indeed the book develops as a series of four visions, but it's this first vision that controls everything else. I turn, verse 12 of chapter 1, to see the voice that was speaking to me.

He saw the seven lampstands, and in the middle of the seven lampstands, one like a son of man. That's the basic vision. Now, who was this book sent to?

[3 : 47] It was sent to the seven churches. Verse 10, write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches. Now these are real churches, real places in Asia, the Roman province of Asia, what we now call Turkey, and the western part of Turkey.

Probably these churches were on a kind of route that messengers would take, a kind of semi-circular route. Messenger would start at Ephesus, he would go north towards Pergamum and Thyatira, then strike across country to Sardis and Philadelphia, down to Laodicea, and then back to the sea at Ephesus.

So, probably, I don't, in other words, I don't think there's any deep spiritual reason for the order of the churches. This is the order in which the messenger would reach the churches, and the, there are probably churches which the Apostle John was particularly associated with, because John, we know, was associated with Ephesus in his later years.

Why are there seven? There were more than seven. Seven is the number of completeness. The book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers, including seven, and seven is the number of completeness, ultimately coming, of course, from the seven days of creation, the completeness of the church, across the world, and throughout the ages.

Some have wanted to argue this is a coded history of the church, coming from early times right up to the present day. Now, I think there's two reasons why we can't go down that road.

[5 : 25] The first is, if you read the commentators, you find they all disagree about which exact period of history, apart from Ephesus itself, that these other churches refer to.

And the other thing is, all these commentators, we have to be in Laodicea, because we're at the very end of the church age, according to that, according to that view, and as I say, no one can agree.

And the trouble as well is, it takes this message out of the living present. This message is addressed to all of us, to every church across the world, throughout the ages, until the Lord returns.

And the point is, all churches, all churches at different times, are like one or other of these. We're not all, there's plenty of Laodicea around us, we'll see, plenty of apathy, plenty of conceit, and so on.

But, not all churches are Laodicea. Not all churches are Philadelphia. In other words, what the message to these churches matters for everyone.

[6 : 29] And the other thing to remember is this. The whole book of Revelation is the letter to the seven churches. These are, if you like, notes to specific places. Write what you see in a book, verse 11.

That's the book of Revelation. And send it to the seven churches. In other words, Ephesus needed to hear what was said to Philadelphia, and so on. And all of us need to hear what is being said to each of these churches.

So, as we, as we go through this series of the lights shining in the darkness, this series is relevant to us that every time, whatever church we belong to, whatever point we may be in our spiritual journey, we need to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

So, let's look then at the church in Ephesus. Chapter 2, verses 1 to 7. And to a church in danger, which is what I've called it.

And I think the letter to the church develops in three stages. First of all, in verses 1 and 2, we have Christ's complete commitment to the church.

[7 : 40] That's the first thing to notice. And remember, since it stands at the head of these letters, this suggests Christ's complete commitment to the church in every generation and in every place.

He's not only committed to the church in Ephesus, he's committed to every church, to all his people, everywhere. We begin with Ephesus, as I say, because it's on the shore, on the shoreline.

It's an important commercial centre and an important cultural centre. It's a place of theatres, of cultural life, a place of commerce, a busy, bustling city.

But it was particularly marked by the worship of the goddess Diana. And you find this in Paul's missionary journeys. Paul spent over two years there. You can read about that in Acts 19, on his second missionary journey.

and encounter the worship of the goddess Diana. And of course, one of the great points of his letter to the Ephesians is that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and exalted above every power, including Diana, the goddess who holds everyone under her sway.

[8 : 51] And later on, he sent Timothy there in 1 Timothy 1, verse 3. It is to that church that Christ writes or to the angel of the church.

Now, there's been an awful lot of debate as well about what the angels of the churches are. Some say it's the leadership of the churches. Double-lays, when you read these commentators, what you discover is not much about revelation, but you discover what their view of church leadership is.

If you read a commentator who says, this is clearly the bishop, you're obviously dealing with an Anglican commentator. If you deal with a church that's saying, oh, this is the minister and elders, you're obviously dealing with a Presbyterian commentator and so on.

Let me mention just this. The book of Revelation is a book of symbols and pictures. It must not be taken with crass literalism. The angel of the church, it seems to me, is showing the concern of heaven with the church on earth.

Now, I know, I said that to once to a group of people and they said, how can you write to an angel? I said, well, that's just literalism. I mean, the angel, writing to an angel is the same kind of area of thinking and picture language as Christ holding the stars in his hand.

[10 : 16] It's all pictorial language. The church on earth is the concern of heaven. And one of the old prayers speaks about we meet with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

As the church here on earth meets, we join with the angels in heaven. It's not a point to be dogmatic about. We must not be dogmatic where the scripture is not clear. The important point is that Christ is totally committed to the church.

Now, I want you to notice the two words that are used here which show his total commitment. The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand. Holds is a rather weak translation.

Grips, grasps would be a better translation. Christ holds the church firmly in his grip. And the right hand of God in the Old Testament is used to mean the power of God.

How does the church survive throughout the centuries and across the world? Will it survive because the Son of Man has it in his grasp? Now, how do we know ultimately the gates of hell will not overcome it?

[11 : 31] It's because Christ is in control. It's because as I said a moment ago, Jesus wins. So, the hand suggests power. The hand also suggests guidance.

Psalms 73 talks about your right hand will guide me. so it suggests power, it suggests guidance. It also suggests allegiance to him. This is not our church.

This is Christ's church. We do not own it. It does, we, Christ does. That is why it is Christ and not the church we have to offer to people.

So, the first thing about Christ's total commitment is that he holds the church in his right hand. The second thing is he walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Once again, the word walks has a long biblical history. Right from the beginning, when the Lord God walked in the garden to meet Adam and Eve, when Enoch walked with God.

[12 : 36] You see, if we had holds on its own, that could almost suggest a kind of remote control, couldn't it? He's at a distance, he holds us, but walks means he is continually involved, he intimately cares, he's intimately concerned.

And both matter when you think of it. We need to know he is great enough to bring the church to glory, don't we? He holds the stars in his hands.

We need to know as well that he cares for us in the struggles down here, and that's suggested by the word walks, and it's also suggested later on by the word know, I know your works.

So the first message from these churches is Christ's total commitment to the church. He has pledged himself to bring the church to glory. He has given promises that he cannot and will not break, that all his redeemed people are going to be with him in glory.

But then the second movement, verses 2 to 6, really, that was really verse 1, I said verses 1 and 2, but verses 2 to 6, the church's incomplete commitment to Christ.

[13 : 48] Now, that could almost be a summary, couldn't it, of church history? The Christ commitment, total commitment, and the church's incomplete commitment.

Now, there is much to commend in this church. Indeed, there are two particular things to commend. But notice, first of all, I know your works.

Now, that is so important. It's so important to realize, particularly when your work is ignored or slighted, that Christ knows.

I know your works. And what particular two things does he commend? First of all, he commends energy and effort in gospel work.

I know your works, your toy, your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear those who are called evil, who are evil. We'll come back to that. But verse three, I know you're enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake.

[14 : 51] That's why I said energy and effort in gospel work. It's not just energy and effort. There's an awful lot of churches put an awful lot of energy and effort. But it's not necessarily gospel work.

It's only gospel work if it's for my name's sake. If it's done in the name of Christ, if it's for Christ and dedicated to him and to his glory.

And that saves us from mere busyness. There is a tendency often in the church, I've said this before, I've long believed that we believe in salvation by grace.

But we don't actually believe in sanctification by grace. We really do believe in sanctification by works. And that's why we are so concerned often to tell people what we are doing.

I know, says the risen Lord. You don't need to tell people, I know your works. And all the works we do for him, for his name's sake, are products of grace.

[15 : 54] They're not to win his favour, they're not to make him feel better about us, or to make him feel that we're really not bad people at all, and they didn't actually make a bad job choosing us. It's for his name's sake.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He died for us before we had ever done anything good or bad. But he does praise energy and effort in gospel work.

None of the work done in his name is wasted. Paul says that, remember back in 1 Corinthians 15, your labour is not in vain in the Lord. That's the important thing, like, same as for my name's sake.

It can often be in vain if it's simply done for other reasons. So, energy and effort. The second thing he commends, and this really is very important today, is it not, is orthodox belief.

Verse 2, you have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and have found them to be false. Then in verse 6, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans.

[16 : 57] Now, we have a particular problem about this today, don't we, not least in the Church of Scotland, that there are messages being promulgated which are not gospel, things which are being said, which depart from the biblical and apostolic gospel, and we find the risen Lord commends those who will fight for the gospel.

That's so important to remember, that it's so easy in these kind of days just to keep your head below the parapet to say nothing. But notice, notice the language here, you have tested them and found them to be false.

How did they find them to be false? They found them to be false because they were not being true to the word of God. So they're against false teaching. Now, some 30 years before, or possibly, probably longer actually, 30, 40 years before, Paul had warned the elders at Ephesus that this would happen.

He had warned them that savage wolves, false teachers, would come in, and from your own number men will arise speaking perverse things. Do not go after them, he says.

And so the church here is remembering those words. These so-called apostles were self-appointed, and John, in his second letter, speaks about such people, such people who had taken upon themselves to preach a message that was palatable to the contemporary world.

[18 : 25] And the Nicolaitans, verse 6, we'll come back to these in the church in Pergamum. It's not entirely clear who these people were, but broadly speaking, it appears that under the guise of Christian freedom, they were preaching compromise with pagan lifestyles.

We'll look at them in more detail when we come to Pergamum, because there is more detail about the kind of things they were teaching. Whereas they were saying freedom in Christ means that we no longer are subject to the commands of Christ.

There's no longer any need for holiness. Freedom means we behave, we live exactly as we want. This is a great church in many ways, isn't it? Energy and effort in gospel work.

Really, they are really taking the word to the world, and they are resisting, they're resisting false teaching. They are making sure that in their church there is no false teaching and no error.

But, but, verse 4, but, I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. I've often mentioned Luther's, Luther's statement that humanity is like a drunk man on a horse who falls off on one side, immediately gets up on the horse, then falls off on the other side.

[19 : 48] right. And since we are fallen people, it is so easy for us to take one part of the truth and make it into the whole of the truth. Ephesus emphasized sound teaching.

Ephesus emphasized right doctrine. They were right to do that, and the Lord commends them for that. That has clearly made them hard and inward looking. See, the trouble is this happens sometimes in some circles.

every effort is made to root out heresy. Every, there is, nothing is allowed that deviates in the slightest from sound teaching.

But very often that leads to a narrowing and a hardening and a continual excluding of more and more people. Fewer and fewer people are acceptable as speakers.

And I'm not talking about heretics, I'm talking about difference of style, I'm talking about difference of approach, often caricatured by the old stories. Only two of us left in this church, now my wife and myself, and I'm not sure about her.

[20 : 53] Now, that's only partly a caricature because this is what happens when churches become so concerned with sound doctrine that they've lost the winsomeness, the winsome romance of their early love.

They've lost their early love. The trouble is, this has not mellowed into a mature affection. And it threatens their very survival. Why is it that this church, with all its virtues, with its stand for the truth, with its effort in gospel work, why is it that the Lord says, I will come and remove your lampstand?

Surely it's this, because they had begun now to misrepresent Christ. Christ. They were so rigid and so unyielding that they had begun to present a Christ who was harsh and unloving like themselves.

Remember, he says, from where you have fallen. Remember doesn't mean dwell in the past and wallow in nostalgia. Remember means inspect your lives now in the light of what it was then.

Now, when people are young, when people come to the Lord, they're often enormously enthusiastic about their faith. And often, of course, youthful enthusiasm can sometimes be rather embarrassing.

[22 : 21] There's no doubt about that. I wonder, though, when we become middle-aged and older, if we sometimes look back at that with a certain embarrassment, not realizing that the Lord is looking back at those days and not remembering it with embarrassment, but remembering it as days when we love Jesus a bit more than we do now.

That's what the Lord is saying to the church. You don't love me the way you used to do. And because you don't love me the way you used to do, you're no longer, you're no longer shining in the darkness.

And so often this has happened. Why do churches die? Why do we walk around towns and villages and come across blocks of flats and garages and so on, which were once churches?

Now one reason, of course, not least in Scotland, is because too many churches were built at a time when various factions were fighting each other. But ultimately the reason a church disappears is none of these things.

It's because the risen Lord removes the lampstand from its place. And so often you find once flourishing churches which are now raking over the embers of past glories.

[23 : 41] Churches where there was once where powerful preaching in the pulpits and enthusiastic gospel witness in the world and they've gone because the Lord has removed the lampstand.

It's a challenge to us, isn't it? And just one more point about this. That does not mean, of course, and we'll see this as we come to the other church, we don't need to bother about doctrine and sound teaching, we just have to be loving.

That would be a gross misunderstanding of this. We need both. It's not a case of whether we are sound or loving. We need to be both. And if we're the one without the other, ultimately we'll become neither.

The lampstand will be removed. Where is the church at Ephesus? It's gone. It's disappeared. Indeed, the city itself has disappeared. It's a ruin. Christ's complete commitment to the church.

The church's incomplete commitment to Christ. And thirdly, complete obedience to the Spirit. How can the rot be stopped? How can we remove the danger of the lampstand being taken away?

[24 : 56] And the answer surely is in the phrase which is repeated over and over again, sometimes before the promise, sometimes after, phrase here in verse 7, he who has a near, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

In other words, we don't, in the case of Ephesus, we don't love more by saying, oh dear me, we should love more, we better try to love more. That's not how love happens, we know that.

Love happens when we open our hearts to the love of Christ and to his living Spirit. And this, of course, is the biblical Christ, the Christ who came from heaven, the Christ who died for our sins, rose again from the dead, the Son of Man who holds the keys of death and of Hades, revealed to us through his word.

In a moment or two, we're going to be singing of that Spirit who reads with us its holy pages and reveals the living Lord. The word and the Spirit must never be separated.

We listen to the voice of the Spirit in the word of God. That's how we listen to it. So, how do we remove the church from danger? Remove it by allowing the Spirit.

[26 : 11] After all, what made the difference between that discouraged group who met in the upper room in Jerusalem? them. It was the Spirit falling on them and the Spirit which was given to the church and never withdrawn.

That's the way in which churches become committed. And this leads to a reward to the one who conquers. I think the word conquer, some of the versions say overcome, simply means persevering to the end.

It doesn't necessarily mean sensational victories or great triumphs. Although God in his grace may give these, it means dogged perseverance right to the end, running right to the finishing post.

I was reading the other day John Stott's final sermon to the Keswick Convention two years ago.

And at the end of that he said, now I'm leaving to go back, to run with even greater vigor as the winning post comes in sight.

[27 : 24] That's what this is about, conquering, persevering, going on till the end. Not in our own effort, but in the power of the Spirit. And just as the opening description of Christ echoes the vision of chapter one, so the closing promise anticipates the end.

I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. The tree of life at the very beginning, barred to humanity because of their sin, and the flaming sword standing in the way.

That is now going to be open to those who have given their lives to Christ in total commitment. And surely it means perfect fellowship, grant to eat of the tree of life in the middle of the paradise of God.

And at the end of the book, this culminates in the marriage of the lamb and his bride. The church is in danger unless it repents.

And this particular church sadly did not repent, and the lampstand was removed. And yet, in the power of the living Spirit, in spite of our weaknesses, in spite of our failures, in spite of our many, many lapses, the one who conquers.

[28 : 41] And that's true of all Christians everywhere. I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. That is a prospect that makes running to the very end and reaching the winning post a very wonderful prospect indeed, is it not?

Amen. Amen. Father, we pray now that you will give us a near to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Father, we pray that we may not so overemphasize certain aspects of Christian living that we neglect others, but that we may be wholly devoted to the Lord as Joshua and Caleb were all the days of their lives.

We ask this in his name. Amen.