

Love and Faith in Ephesus and Smyrna

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Date: 25 August 2024

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- [0 : 01] Let's pray again. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, thank you for your word. Thank you for the book of Revelation and we thank you for this passage in the book of Revelation.
- We ask that as we look at it now, that you would lead us into all truth and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.
- For you are our rock and our redeemer. In Jesus' name, amen. I first went to Nigeria as a callow 23-year-old.
- Yes, yes, even I was that young once. But when I went there, the only way of communication with Australia was through letters.
- You know, literal pen on paper letters. And they would take six weeks to get there. And six weeks back, of course.
- [1 : 14] So if I had any question that I wanted answering or anything I wanted a response to, I had to wait three months for an answer. Needless to say, I looked forward to letters from home very much.
- Well, here in chapters two and three of Revelation, we have seven letters. But they're quite distinctive letters. Letters to churches from their Lord, the Lord Jesus himself.
- Now, all these seven letters to the churches have a very similar pattern. It's, first of all, addressed to the angel of the church in whatever town is mentioned.
- These are the words of Jesus. Although it doesn't say Jesus, it describes him. It uses descriptions mostly taken from the vision in chapter one.
- In one case, that's not true, but we'll get to that. And then I know something of your deeds, usually good deeds first, then evil or bad deeds as well.
- [2 : 30] And there are some variations which we'll see. In Smyrna, there are no evil or bad things said about them. Usually, but not always, I am coming, so repent.
- Some sort of statement of judgment. And then a promise to those who are victorious. And finally, although sometimes it's reversed, an exhortation to hear the message that the Spirit speaks to the churches.
- So, let's look at the first of these letters. It's addressed to the angel of the church in Ephesus, write, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.
- It's addressed to the angel or the messenger of the church in Ephesus. Ephesus. Now, if you've been paying attention, you'll have noticed that we have concentrated a lot on Ephesus in recent weeks.
- We just finished the book of Acts where we met the town of Ephesus. And here, again, the town is mentioned, just there.
- [3 : 53] Remember that John is writing from Patmos, off here. Ephesus was not a small town. It was, at the time, the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire and is estimated to have a population of up to a quarter of a million people.

Ephesus was an important city and its main cultural claim was the magnificent temple to the Greek god Artemis or Diana to the Romans, which was one of the seven wonders of the world, of the ancient world.

The place was a hub of pagan and emperor worship. And there are many emperor worship temples there. And from the book of Acts, as I said, set about 40 or so years before Revelation was written, we learn that the apostle Paul spent quite some time in Ephesus and actually wrote one of his last letters to that church.

So, it's to the church in Ephesus. These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

This description of Jesus comes straight from chapter one, which we looked at last week. We can see quite easily what's depicted by this image because it explains what the seven stars and the seven lampstands are all about.

[5 : 31] The stars represent the angels of the churches and he walks among lampstands. The lampstands are the churches and Jesus is right there amongst them.

And so, this present traveling with his church, Jesus, commends them for their deeds. I know your deeds.

I know your deeds. Your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people. I know that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false.

Jesus knows his church. But their good deeds are the first thing that's commended and they're described in two different ways.

Their hard work and their patient endurance, their perseverance. their hard work is described first when Jesus says, I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them to be false.

[6 : 56] The term wicked people is a general term for unrepentant sinners, people who deliberately turn their back on God, reject him.

Now, in Acts 20, we have a record of Paul's last physical meeting with the Ephesian elders and in that address to them, he warned them about two groups of people, people he described as savage wolves that would come in and try and destroy the flock of God and he warned them that there would also be people who would teach falsehoods and draw people away from the truth and both such groupings were there in Ephesus 40 years later.

Unrepentant sinners who blatantly reject God and preachers who claim to teach the truth but actually are proclaiming falsehoods and of course falsehoods about God is heresy isn't it?

It's not a small thing but the Ephesian church were on to them they recognised both for what they are finding their heresy false and not tolerating their blatant sin we're we could be like the Ephesians in this but being this way as a church requires well-taught Christians Christians who can identify truth and falsehood steadfast Christians loyal faithful solid Christians who recognise right and wrong and keep to the right and resist the wrong back in the days when people still used cash there was the danger of the forgery of bank notes and bank tellers had to have skills to spot forgeries as they came across them and the way that they used to train people to spot forgeries was not to educate them in all the different types of bad bank notes but to make them so familiar with the real ones that they could by the look and the feel and even the smell of them spot the fakes and so it is with us we need to become so at home with biblical truth and teachings so familiar with the scriptures that when dodgy teachings come along we immediately know that something's not quite right and then have the tools to be able to resist it it seems that Paul's warning from 40 odd years before had been heeded by the

Ephesian church and they had resisted wickedness and bad teaching that had tried to derail their faith and so they are applauded by Jesus himself that's the first thing that they're commended for and the other is found in verse 3 you have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary as we have seen these are churches that are facing persecution harassment arrest beatings opposition and even death and the Ephesians were bearing up under this pressure and hanging in there and so Jesus commends them again for this now these are all really good things but it's not all gold stars for the

[11:16] Ephesian church there is an and yet in verse 4 yet I hold this against you you have forsaken the love you had at first they'd lost their love the Ephesian church had lost their love for each other and for God now we don't know how it happened or why it happened we don't know whether they still had some love selective love or none at all but we do know that love had evaporated from the church now they have just been commended for some very important things their faith had held up in important ways and yet these are Christian people who have somehow lost the love that they had when they were first converted they were still

Christian people they are a church after all but this is a very serious warning look at verse 5 consider how far you have fallen repent and do the things you did at first if you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place this is not just a small matter to be attended to lack of love in the church is dangerous Christian people are and must be people who love each other and love God it's not an optional extra Jesus himself said this this is a little story hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees the Pharisees got together one of them an expert in the law tested him with this question teacher which is the greatest commandment in the law and he thought he had

Jesus in that you know surely Jesus is going to trip up and Jesus replied love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind this is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like it love your neighbour as yourself all the law and the prophets that is all of scripture hang on these two commands commandments wow love is central the great passage on love in first Corinthians chapter 13 something that we're all pretty familiar with I'm sure is actually a rebuke by

Paul to a Christian church that had a very similar problem to what we're reading about here in Ephesians they'd lost their love and Paul said without love I am nothing in our Old Testament reading the book of Jeremiah the prophet is addressing God's people who had a similar problem and he said you strayed so far from me followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves I am nothing worthless and that's exactly what the Ephesian church were threatened with becoming nothing the removal of their lampstand taking away their right to be called a church even and so hang on that's the wrong that's the one I'm after and so they are called to action consider repent and do their position repent of how they have gone wrong and do what they know to be

God's will but this isn't just a warning for the Ephesians is it because the command to love the obligation to love the expectation to love is not just for them back then but on all Christians everywhere at all times including the Christians here in this room it's not just for the pastors for the sensitive Christians for the touchy-feely Christians or even just for the mature Christians it's for all Christian people love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbour as yourself so it's worth considering how do

[17:19] I love God how do we love God think of two people in love they're always talking about each other they're always seeking to spend time with each other they think that each other says the most clever and funny and wonderful things they're centred on each other they delight in each other how do you love God do you seek him above all others do you love to do the things that he does do you always look forward to hearing from him in his word do you look forward to the times spent together or do you look for excuses to avoid those times how do we love to get

God and other people in this church if we come up short on any of those questions we need to do some serious business with God consider what it is where is your true heart repent and then do remedial action turn back to him start loving as you used to when you first believed but then the Ephesians get another gold star but this you have in your favor you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans which I also hate now they've just been reprovved for not loving and yet they're commended for hating seems a little bit strange really to be commended for hate but look at what they hate they hate the things that Jesus hates yes

Jesus hates Jesus hates sin in all its guises now we don't really know who the Nicolaitans were we'll meet them again when we come to the letter to Pergamum but as far as we can tell they were people who didn't hold to godly standards they seem to dismiss the Old Testament and the Bible in general they seem to be people who indulged in adultery and idolatry lax morals and debauchery compromising at every turn with their pagan neighbours who lacked any moral compass just fitting in with all of the mess that's going on around them sound familiar we live in a very similar world today and we could do well to be like the Ephesians in this as well how do we much do we hate those sorts of things the sorts of things that revolt god do they revolt us or do we secretly wish that we were in there as well the

Ephesians were great at doctrine believing all the right things and they were great at doing the right things but they were very poor at loving whoever has ears let them hear what the spirit says to the churches this could be just another listen to what I'm saying moment except of course that we have already read Revelation chapter 1 verse 3 which says blessed is the one who hears it and takes to heart what is written in it because the time is near hearing what the spirit says to the churches is not just taking in the words it's taking it to heart and obeying it but notice it isn't what the spirit says to the church in

Ephesus it's what it's saying to the churches this message was never intended just for the Ephesian church it was intended for all the churches that the book was sent to all the churches get to hear the message to all the churches and it's to all churches everywhere actually even ours here today everyone who has ears and I think that includes all of us here tonight we all need to listen to the words of the spirit and there is a promise to the one who is victorious now we'll see that through the book of revelation people are only victorious through the death and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ so it is to the one who has faith in the death of

[23 : 56] Jesus for them those victorious ones that the promise belongs and the promise is to eat of the tree of life now we first saw the tree of life we last saw the tree of life in scripture way back way way back in Genesis chapter two and three that tree we last encountered was in the garden of Eden wasn't it and Adam and Eve had the right to eat from that tree but that right was taken away when they sinned and they were banished from the garden and forbidden to eat and it actually it's guarded by God that no one was ever able to go there again it's been denied to their descendants all the way down through the centuries and eons and yet here it is promised again to the ones who are victorious through

Christ we get the right to go back to the garden the paradise of God and eat of the tree of life for the ones who are victorious okay let's now move to Smyrna Smyrna is there just about 60 kilometers to the north of Ephesus Smyrna is modern day Izmir it's an actual city that's still around in those days it was smaller than Ephesus now it's the second largest city in Turkey and Ephesus is just ruins Smyrna as a city had a strong allegiance to Rome and again there were several temples to emperors in that city emperor worship was big in

Smyrna so the letter is written again to the angel or messenger of the church in Smyrna and again Jesus is the one from whom it comes and he's described in terms that we saw in chapter one he is the first and the last who died and came to life again and again there are words of affirmation I know your afflictions which was a general term defined by the following by what follows and again there's two different aspects to it your poverty and the slander against you this was a church that was poor in material terms probably they were poor not because they came from the lower classes churches in the ancient world seemed to be consistently combine people from all classes no they were poor because of persecution we saw a very similar sort of thing in the

Muslim dominated states of northern Nigeria in those places once it is known that you are Christian it is almost impossible to get a job especially in the public service or any sort of high paying professional job your kids will not get entrance to a university in such places if you are a follower of Jesus and justice is unobtainable for believers who are cheated or defrauded courts just brush them off the police don't care if you are known to be a follower of Jesus you see persecution isn't just restricted to violence and abuse it's also what we might call passive by denying

Christian people rights justice and opportunity it still goes on today and it was going on in Smyrna and ironically for the Smyrnan Christians it was their spiritual richness that led to their material poverty because that's what this verse says that they are they are actually rich they're poor yes but actually in the things that matter they are rich because they know Jesus the second way that the church in Smyrna was afflicted was through slander in the Roman Empire Jews were granted exemption from the duty to worship the emperor they were the only people group that weren't compelled to emperor worship they were free to follow their own worship only the

[30 : 10] Jews so here in Smyrna one of the most Roman cities outside Rome they are the ones from their position of privilege of religious immunity making the slanderous accusations against Christians now we aren't told the content of the slander in this case but the ones who are slandering are labelled as fake Jews not because they weren't descendants of Abraham because they were but because they refused to identify Jesus as the Messiah as any real Jew any genuine Jew would instead Jesus says they are the synagogue of Satan Satan of course means the accuser or maybe more aptly here the slanderer so instead of being the people of God which the

Jews were intended to be they are the enemies of God because they are the enemies of his church so life wasn't easy for the Christians in Smyrna they were facing passive and active persecution so the words of Jesus to them are striking he literally says to them stop fearing don't be afraid don't be afraid of what you're about to suffer I tell you the devil will put some of you in prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for ten days be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you life as your victor's crown doesn't sound very encouraging stop fearing you're about to suffer you're about to be put in prison you're about to suffer persecution so stop being afraid prisons weren't very pleasant places in those days they were very harsh places actually many people died in prison many suffered disease abuse they went hungry there and very few people got out alive so this doesn't sound like words of comfort but

Jesus is saying don't be afraid and Jesus is saying that persecution this is persecution with more to come and it's a test of the evil one and that they are to be faithful even faithful to the point of death wait a minute Jesus can't you let us out can't you rescue us what's wrong but Jesus is saying no be faithful don't let suffering and hard times take away your faith because so often in our world we do people do allow suffering to take away their faith people follow Jesus when things are rosy and until they face a trial a difficulty a loss of job a pandemic a heartbreak illness relationship breakdown then that faith seems to evaporate hang on keep being faithful

Jesus is saying to these Christians and actually there is real and deep comfort here deep comfort because the time is limited it's not forever suffering is time limited whether the 10 days mentioned here is literal or symbolic is not the important thing what is important is that the time of intense suffering is bounded Jesus is keeping it restricted and the other deeply comforting thing here is that Jesus will give them the crown of life the crown of life not just speaks of living where there was death but of triumphing in it have been given royal status where in this life they had the lowest status they were poor and notice it who it is who's promising this

Jesus who is the first and the last the one who died and rose again he's the one who's ability and position allows him and guarantees that he will indeed have the crown of life to give them because he's the one who died and rose again he's the one who was before all things and will be after all things the first and the last and so this little window of persecution that you are suffering is nothing in comparison to the one who is the first and the last so despite all of the persecution the ugliness and the suffering they are with and are known by and will be honored by the one who is the first and the last the one who has been victorious over death

[36 : 29] Jesus who died and rose he lives now and he lives with you he's with you and the letter finishes with further encouragement whoever has ears let him hear what the spirit says to the churches the one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death same formula of exhortation to hear to take in what the spirit is saying to the churches but instead of the right to eat of the tree of life here it's immunity from the second death now in the book of revelation the first death is physical death where we get killed or we grow old or however it comes to us which all of us will face and for many of the Smyrnans Jesus has said this is imminent the second death is the judgment death the eternal death where those who have turned away from God are expelled from his presence forever so this is a great promise to Christian people now just as it was for the Smyrnans way back then those who are in

Christ who are victorious through his blood and his death will not have to face the second death so in conclusion these two letters are exhorting us as they exhorted the Ephesians and the Smyrnans to persevere in faith in Jesus now we're facing very different circumstances in a very different cultural setting to the ones they faced but Jesus is the same and his promises and his commands remain the same know the truth seek it out feed yourself on it be sustained by it and let no one deviate you from it go to Bible study read your

Bibles every day seek the truth immerse yourself in godly messages from it as much as you can remain steadfast in the truth when our workmates our friends or even our families even our parents mock us for our faith in Christ remain firm when things are not great for us when we're tempted to give up from following Jesus remain firm but don't ever ever neglect love love for God that longs for him that seeks him out that does what pleases him and obeys him and love for Christian brothers and sisters that honors them lifts them up and supports them and serves them and puts their interests above our own love

I love it that we at St. John's 5pm have over the last three months consistently loved one another I've observed it amongst you but don't let us lose that first love and if we're starting to lose that first love consider where you've come from repent and then do go back to loving with all your heart and soul and mind and the promises the glorious promises of the glorious son of man are ours eating of the tree of life gaining the victor's crown protection even from the second death what promises what promises to look forward to about 55 years or so after

John wrote this book the elderly bishop of Smyrna a man named Polycarp who tradition has it was mentored in his younger life by the apostle John himself this old man was arrested in Smyrna for refusing to bow down and called the Roman emperor lord lord it's reported that at his trial when given one last chance to do obeisance to the emperor he said eight and six years eighty and six years I have served him and he has done me no wrong how then can I blaspheme my king and savior and they burned him at the stake and then because he wasn't quite dead he was stabbed until he did die the first death but I'm convinced that

[42 : 41] Polycarp was not and will not be hurt at all by the second death he was faithful even to the point of death let's pray Lord God our heavenly father we thank you for your word we thank you for the truths it contains we thank you for the warnings it contains because that helps us and causes us to consider and reflect and think about where we might be falling short Lord God as we consider now would you touch us would you show us where we are falling short and would you give us the grace to turn in repentance and do the things that we know to be your will would you keep us strong in our faith remaining steadfast and firm would you keep us loving loving you with all our heart and soul and mind and loving those around us who are your people as ourselves

Lord we thank you for your word write it on our hearts we pray in Jesus name amen