

Good morning! If you were here last week, you know that we finished the gospel of John and today we start John's Revelation. We are going to spend seven weeks in Revelation (a good Biblical number) and we will look at the seven churches Jesus addresses in his revelation to John. So no dragons, beasts or great prostitutes in this series unless JD gets really carried away. But maybe one day.

Alright, so you can't just jump into a book like Revelation without some context. As I said, this was written by the apostle John as he received it from Jesus while he was banished on the Island of Patmos. In chapter one, John hears a great noise, turns around and sees Jesus walking between seven lamp stands and in His hands holding seven stars. The book of revelation has seven sections, of which this is the first, and in this first section Jesus has seven addresses. One for each of the seven churches. Each of these messages has seven sections. Are we seeing a theme yet?

Numbers in ancient apocalyptic literature contain meaning. And the meaning of the number 7 was complete. In other words, these seven churches in some way represent all the churches that will ever exist. This is why verse seven says, **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.** Churches, not church at Ephesus. These letters were written *to* one specific church, but *for* all churches. The successes, trials and failures of these churches will be shared by every church that will ever come after, including us. The seven lamp stands represent the platform given to these churches to shine into the world. And the seven stars in Jesus' hand represent the seven pastors of these churches who are called to bring light to the churches so they can shine brightly on that lamp stand.

So here is where we pick up chapter 2. The first address to the church in Ephesus. And in this address we see the death of a local church. All of us have seen churches in decline. Declining in attendance, relevance and influence. Churches that at best have become nothing more than a social club and who have no real impact on the community around it and at worst close their doors. And the sad thing is that most of these churches had a very strong beginning! Most of them did at one time have influence and relevance. So what happened? It wasn't that they didn't adapt to contemporary music. It wasn't that they didn't move to a community group model. It wasn't because they didn't have elders. And I would argue that it wasn't because of any real doctrinal shift either. The reason churches die is because they lose the love they once had. And this is exactly the problem in Ephesus.

So I want to look at how this happens. I'm going to divide this text into three seasons of the life of the church. First, we will see a strong beginning. Second, we will see the downward turn. And then, finally, we will see a church at a crossroads.

I. A strong beginning

So first, the strong beginning. Now, the nice thing here is that we know a whole lot about this church from what Luke recorded in Acts, what Paul wrote them in the letter to the Ephesians and from the letters Paul wrote Timothy while he was pastoring this church.

And from all this, we can understand why Jesus begins praising the Ephesian church the way He does.

First, they toiled. Jesus says in verse 2: **I know your works, your toil...** We can see in Acts 19 the Ephesian church started with just 12 men led by the Apostle Paul. They spoke boldly first in the synagogue and then in the town hall. Many came to faith and were taught how to live this faith into the early hours of the morning. People were working hard not just to make converts, but to make disciples.

Not only were they working to make disciples, but incredible things were happening all around them. Handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched Paul's skin were being taken around town and healing all kinds of sicknesses. So many people were being held that a group of itinerant Jewish exorcists who happened to be in town wanted this power. That had to be an interesting group, itinerant Jewish exorcists. So they tried to use Jesus' name to increase their success. It wasn't that they believed in Jesus, they just tried to use His name as a good luck charm. And do you remember what happened the first time they tried? The demon possessed man said, "Jesus we know and Paul we recognize, but who are you?" Then he leaped onto the man and after a beating the itinerant Jewish exorcists ran away naked. One pastor said that as a rule of thumb, when you leave a fight without your pants, it's safe to say that you lost. It really doesn't matter what the other guy looks like.

People then began to burn their really expensive dark arts books, repenting and turning to Jesus. Luke tells us that everyone in Ephesus heard about Jesus. That was probably over 200,000 people. The church at Ephesus worked hard! Now, there are some people in this room who have worked crazy hard to get Grace off the ground. People like Isaac, Baldwin, Andy and Chris, not to mention their wives. But I think it's safe to say that as hard as we all have worked, those who planted the church at Ephesus worked even harder.

Not only did they work hard though, Jesus says they endured well. **I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance... I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.**

At this point, the Ephesian church is between 40 and 60 years old. The simple fact that the church got off the ground and lived this long is a testament to their endurance. They were one of the earliest and most important churches. Have you ever heard someone say something like, "Our church was playing contemporary music before contemporary music was cool." Or, "Our church was preaching expositionally before expository preaching was cool." Well, the Ephesian church was thriving before the word Christian was cool. They just called themselves 'The Way.' The term 'Christian' hadn't even been created yet. And during the course of the ministry of this church, the Christian presence was so strong that the economy actually began to change. The people who made money off of selling idols for the shrine of Artimus couldn't make money anymore. And when the economy changed, people got mad and rioted against the Christians. And we

know from history that this was just the first of many waves of persecution against that church. Yet the Ephesian church endured and did not grow weary.

Can you imagine if our presence in this town was so great that the economy began to change? What if drugs just didn't sell here anymore. What if it was well known in law schools around the nation that in Oxford people just don't sue each other and the divorce rate was so low that divorce attorneys couldn't make a living here. What if people began to give such great sums of money to world missions that donations to Ole Miss athletics suffered? That might cause a riot:) Now, I'm not trying to say anything negative about contributing towards Ole Miss athletics, but simply stating how the economy would likely change.

The Ephesian church endured the persecution that came on them. They certainly endured more than anything we have been asked to endure. They toiled, they endured and then lastly, they maintained good doctrine...

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.

...you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

The Ephesians were long recognized for their ability to hold sound doctrine. So who are the Nicolaitans? I have no idea. But apparently they had bad doctrine, which Jesus hated, and the Ephesian church would have no part of them. Paul actually told them in Acts 20:29 that this would happen:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Apparently, they took this very seriously because we have letters from around the Roman Empire in these early years where church fathers would comment on the fact that Ephesus was not a place anyone with bad doctrine would want to go. Maybe like the First Pres. Jackson of their day. And I mean that as a compliment! They loved their doctrine and I'm sure they didn't mind having 'Him who walks between the seven lamp stands' saying so.

At Grace, we certainly have holes that need filling, but if there is one area that I feel pretty good about, it's our doctrine. We are investing in men and women so that they can know and teach the Bible. We are training young men to preach. We have a Bible study called Theology Thursday. My goodness, we were bold enough to put 'Bible' in our name! Yet we know that as meticulous as the Ephesians were, it wasn't enough. We know there is this looming 'but' coming.

And maybe there is this really optimistic person out there thinking, "But we have JD teaching every week! Drew is leading our youth. Jared is writing his own songs. And our announcements...how could we possibly get off track? Well, the announcements are a really good point. And we do have really great leadership. But do you know who was leading the Ephesian church? They were planted by Paul, pastored first by Timothy and

later by the Apostle John. Their leadership didn't just know the Bible, they wrote it. Yet not even this leadership and their maintaining meticulous doctrine was enough to save this church from some of the harshest criticism they could receive from Jesus Himself.

The Ephesian church had so much to be proud of...and so do we! They worked hard, they endured and they held sound doctrine. But that isn't enough if you lack love.

II. Downward Turn

Let's look at this downward turn. Jesus says, **But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.**

Some translations say, "You have lost your first love." All the hard work, all the endurance, all the great doctrine will fail you if you lack love. Paul goes so far as to say this:

If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

So what had happened to this church? They were against the right things. They were against immorality, they were against evil, they were against bad doctrine and they were willing to work very hard to endure the persecutions that would come against them. But here is the problem! All they knew was defense. They were against all these things, but they weren't ultimately for Jesus.

They began with a deep love for Jesus that flowed out into their fellowship and their city. But that love waned and now they were simply against things that they perceived to be threats. The Ephesian church had gone from being propagators of Jesus' love to being custodians of sound doctrine and proper decorum.

We can be against sex trafficking, against abortion, against failing marriages, against bad schools, against racism, against bad doctrine, but if we aren't ultimately and supremely *for* Jesus our church WILL die.

So some of you might be thinking, "Die? That sounds a bit extreme, Jim." Well, that's what Jesus is threatening in verse 5. **If not** [that means if you don't love again], **I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place.**

It is a well documented fact that once a church loses its love for Jesus, it has about two generations to live. There is a lot of Pew and Barna Research on this if you want to see it. Once a church loses the love it first had, it will go one of two ways. It will either go liberal or bunker. A church will go liberal if losing the love it once had causes them to let go first of sound doctrine and ultimately Jesus Himself. Liberal churches claim to have love, but it isn't Biblical love. They put all their efforts and money into helping people

with physical needs (which is a great thing), but they ignore our greatest need, the spiritual one. I talked with a pastor of a very well known church in Oxford (I want to name him, but I won't) and he told me that he doesn't believe Jesus really resurrected. He doesn't believe His death on the cross atoned for our sins. He doesn't believe that Jesus is the only way. This is a church that has lost the love I know it once had and will be gone in a generation.

But that doesn't seem to be the way the Ephesian church is trending. They aren't trending liberal, they are trending bunker. This is the other end of the spectrum. Instead of opening your doors wide to whatever doctrine might come in your door like liberal churches do, a bunker church is going to make secondary and tertiary issues primary and then build a big wall around itself to keep anyone who doesn't look like them, dress like them, educate like them, vote like them and talk like them in. And just like the liberal churches, they will be dead in a generation or two.

Biblical love, though, is one that holds tight to Jesus and all that He teaches, but let's loose every other preference we might have. Biblical love welcomes diversity, discomfort, awkwardness and messiness. Biblical love sacrifices for others that they might know Jesus. That is the love the Ephesian church had at first and that is the love that is to mark us now, lest we lose our lamp stand.

And apparently this problem came in very early because Paul wrote this to Timothy when he was pastoring the Ephesian church (1 Tim. 1:4-6):

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussions...

So how can we know if we are in the same kind of danger? When will we know if we are losing the love we had at first and should be in fear of losing our lamp stand?

Now, I have to be honest and say that as a church, I'm feeling pretty good about Grace right now. But this warning is hear for a reason. And I think one of the big warning signs for us as a church will be that things cease to be messy. Biblical love creates messiness. But messy churches are often the best kind of churches.

Here's what I mean. My wife works so hard to keep our house clean. But most days, I come home and the house isn't clean. The lights we left off are now on. The toys that were in the garage are now in the yard. It's not that she isn't good at her job, it's that she has four little kids working against her. She might say five, but we won't go there now. Our house is messy because there are little ones being raised, developed and trained... and this is messy work. But one day, I know I will come home and my house will be exactly the way I left it. Rooms clean, lights off, toys up because my kids, Lord willing, will be gone. In the same way, a church that is marked by Biblical love, that is making a difference in its community, that is being used to expand the Kingdom of God WILL BE

messy. But do you know what kind of churches don't have this mess? Liberal churches and bunker churches who have lost the love they once had.

Now, because the church is made up of individuals, we have to ask ourselves, have we lost the love that we had at first? I worked really hard on this list of diagnostics that might signal a loss of love, but I never felt good about it. I have some ideas as to why I didn't feel good about it. I think it could have created doubt where there doesn't need to be any. But mainly, I didn't like the list because I think that if you have the Holy Spirit inside of you, you know the answer to this question. This is why Jesus says, **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says..** So let me ask you just one question. If Jesus came to you right now, do you think He would say that you have lost the love you had at first?

If the answer is yes, first, know you are in good company with at least most of the Ephesian church. But second, if you are at this crossroads, know that there is a path back. What is that path?

III. The Crossroads

Jesus says to the Ephesian church and to each of us if we have lost the love we had at first to do three things: Remember, repent and return.

Remember. Look at verse 5 **Remember therefore from where you have fallen....** I think partly this verse is implying to remember what it was first like when you decided to give your life to Jesus. Remember the motivations, the feelings, the forgiveness, the love. But even more than this I think this verse is saying remember who it was that you were giving your life to.

There is this interesting last line in our passage in verse 7 that says, **To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**

Of course Jesus has in mind here the tree of life from Genesis that was guarded by an angel after the fall which is the same tree in Revelation 22 in the New Earth. But I think Jesus is doing something specifically for the Ephesians here. The great temple of Artemis was in Ephesus. It was one of the great wonders of the ancient world. And the temple was an asylum. And the focus point of the system of asylum was a particular tree in the central garden. This tree was even printed on some Roman coins. So, criminals who came within a certain distance of it would be free from capture and punishment.

And Jesus is saying, that's not the tree that gives true life! That may provide you with a temporary asylum in this world, but it won't give you the eternal asylum you really need. It won't give you the forgiveness you really seek. Only I can. All who come to me will have true life. Remember that Jesus. The One you gave your life to maybe decades ago.

And if you can't remember, maybe today is the day that trust Jesus and decide to follow Him for the very first time.

So we need to remember, then we need to repent. **Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent...**

Repenting is simple. I'm not saying it's easy, but it is simple. When you remember the Jesus you first gave your life to, run to him. Turn from all the other things that pull you away from Him and run. It doesn't matter how well you run, just run. Have you ever been around a baby who took his or her first steps? I have seen this four times and can tell you exactly how this goes down. The baby had a head that was way too large for its body and he got off balance and his big head started to fall forward. Then the baby's instincts and physics take over and his feet start moving so his big head doesn't hit the ground. He might get one or two steps, but that's it. And what does everyone around say to this? "Yay!! Great job!!" And then some parent will sweep that baby up into their arms, love them and say, "Well done!"

Do you know what I have never heard anyone say? Those were terrible steps! That's what our enemy wants to tell us though. You can't do it. You're too far gone. There is no way forward. Well, if it was up to us, yes, that would be true. But if you repent the best way you know how, your Father in heaven will be there waiting to sweep you up and hold you and tell you 'Well done!!' Remember and repent.

Then, lastly, we are to return. **Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.** Do the works you did at first. This is returning. Works without remembering and repenting will be of no use. But works done with remembering and repenting are of great use. Why? Because remember and repenting will ensure your works are done with love. We remember the love God has for us in Jesus, we run to Him and from the love we receive comes a love we can give.

Churches can labor hard and die. But the church who remembers and repents will love. They will love each other and those around them. And that church will produce works of eternal value. That church will work and not grow weary. And that church will conquer.

This is why Jesus says at the end of our passage, and to all six remaining churches, **To the one who conquers...** The one who conquers is the one whose love for Christ perseveres to the end. Will we be a conquering church?

So, I can't finish without answering one last question. Did the Ephesian church repent? At the end of the day, I don't know. All the commentators do point out that there is no longer a church in Ephesus. There is a strong argument to support the idea that Jesus did remove their lamp stand. But that isn't the question Jesus wants us to ask. He wants us to ask ourselves if we will be a church that keeps the love we had a first. Both individually and collectively. And if we do stray from that love, will we be a church that is quick to remember, repent and return? Or will we lose our lamp stand?

