

2. First Love Lost

Revelation 2:1-7

Prayer

Introduction

The Thrill Is Gone pretty much became late blues legend B.B. King's signature song. He even won a Grammy award for his recording of it in 1970.

The song tells the story of a couple who were once in love growing apart, apparently because of something the woman had done.

There's a line in that song which goes:

*"The thrill is gone baby
The thrill is gone away from me
Although, I'll still live on
But so lonely I'll be"*

How many of us remember that first thrill of salvation, when Jesus called us, drew us in, removed the scales from our eyes, unstopped our ears and revealed himself to us as saviour?

Do you remember how much you loved him for it, for who you discovered him to be? Do remember how much you wanted to tell the world about him? Do you remember how much you wanted to please him, serve him, serve his church?

You might even remember the excitement of being part of a new church, or a new church plant. It was like Jesus had hit 'reboot' on your church life, and everything was new, and shiny and exciting.

But how many of us have lost that initial "thrill"? And though we continue to "still live on" as recognisable and serious Christians, busy about the Lord's work, with a very low tolerance for any teaching that isn't explicitly from God's word, perhaps we do so more out of duty, or even routine, than out of love like the love we first had, and the love we knew from God?

Reading The Letters

Before we dive right into this first letter, it's worth talking about the seven letters in general. All of the letters are very similar in content and even in tone, and they're all dictated by the same Jesus, so we can make some general observations about all the letters.

Their purpose

We touched on this last week, but it's worth reminding ourselves. We know from what John says in the first chapter that the church is experiencing persecution. John calls himself, "... *your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus,*" (Revelation 1:9 ESV).

This persecution seems to be confirmed by the content of the letters themselves, and is supported by what we read in the rest of the book. Despite, or perhaps even because of this persecution, the church is battling against false teaching and sin as well.

So it's into this context that we must place the **first words of the book**:

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. [...] Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near."

(Revelation 1:1–3 ESV)

So, into this situation of persecution, and doctrinal and moral compromise, this whole book, which includes these letters, is written to reveal Jesus to God's servants, and to bless them, if they will listen and obey what is written in it - because time is short and the need is urgent.

Their place in the book

We should also note the place the letters occupy in the book. Yes, they're right at the beginning, yet they seem to have very little in common with the largest section in the book, the visions of 4-20.

But each of the letters actually hold together the very beginning and very end of the book, which points to a clear relationship between what's going on in each letter and what's going in the middle section of the book.

Let me explain. Each letter opens with Jesus introducing himself. And the way he introduces himself is always in one or more terms of **how he revealed himself to John in ch1**. "*The words of him who...*". We mentioned this last week.

But each letter then closes with a promise to those who overcome, or those who conquer, which is taken directly from the very end of the book, in Revelation 21:6:

*“And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. **The one who conquers** will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”*

(Revelation 21:6–7 ESV)

This means that when we come to read chapters 4-20, the middle section of the book and the major vision of the book, we need to use these letters like lenses through which the visions can be brought into focus.

For our purposes, however, we just need to realise that these letters are an essential part of the Revelation of Jesus, because without them we won't understand the rest of the book. So we should pay attention to what is said in them.

Their structure

The letters also share a common structure. And it looks something like this:

1. **Commission** - This is where John is told each time, *“To the angel of the church in x write:”*
2. **Characterisation** - (I had to pick a word that started with C!) It's really an identification, or a description. Like we've said, this is where Jesus describes himself each time in terms of the revelation in ch1.
3. **Commendation** - Jesus says, *“I know your works”*, and then commends them for the way they are practically living out their faith. But there is one church where Jesus finds nothing at all to commend — the church in Laodicea, in ch3:14-22.
4. **Condemnation** - Jesus then accuses the churches of compromise with the world outside the church, or compromise in doctrine or morality inside the church. There are only two churches who escape Jesus' condemnation — the church in Smyrna, 2:8-11, and the church in Philadelphia, 3:7-13.
5. **Command** - The condemnation is followed by a command to the churches, something to act upon immediately, in order to endure or conquer. This is a call to repent in the case of doctrinal, moral or spiritual compromise, or it is a call to simply remain faithful, to hold fast. This is always accompanied by a further command with echoes from Isaiah's ministry in the Old Testament, and Jesus' ministry in the New, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* That command is important and serious, because God is saying that if anyone has even one ear with which to hear, they will be held accountable for what they do with God's command.

6. **Conquering**: Finally, Jesus declares a promise of future glory and blessing to those who 'conquer', who overcome, which reflects his own conquering (as we read in 3:21) and which looks ahead to the end of the book and Jesus' final victory, in ch21:7. It's a promise of salvation.

Keeping this structure in mind will help us unpack each letter and see the common threads between the letters.

Their Relevance

Finally, let's comment briefly on their relevance. Thought these letters were written to real churches that really existed, full of real people, with real needs, we aren't to think that what is said in the letters is only relevant to the church it was written to in the time it was written.

All these letters, together with the rest of the book, were sent to all of the churches. Jesus commands **John in 1:11**:

"Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches..."

(Revelation 1:11 ESV)

And in each letter, we also read the **repeated words**:

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

(Revelation 2:7 ESV)

So, there was a direct message for each church, but all the other churches were to read each letter as well, because they were no less relevant to them. Likewise, we are to read these letters, hear them and keep what is written in them, because they are no less relevant to us, even in Buderim, Australia, even in A.D. 2017.

The Letter To Ephesus

Let's get into the first letter.

1. The Commission

First we read where the letters is going:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:"

(Revelation 2:1 ESV)

As I said last week, the word for 'angel' and the word for 'messenger' are the same in the original Greek of New Testament.

This would mean that John was commanded to write his letter to the 'messenger', or the pastor/teacher of each church. It would make sense for John to receive his vision from Jesus via a 'heavenly messenger' (i.e. an angel), and then to pass it on to an 'earthly messenger' (i.e. the teaching elder of a local church). It seems redundant for John to receive his revelation from a heavenly being, to write it down in human words, and then pass it on to another heavenly being.

However, every other time we see the word 'angel' in the book of Revelation, it refers undoubtably to a heavenly being. So, another reasonable argument asks, "Why should it be any different in chapters 2-3?" Of course, that also opens up other questions about the relationship between the churches and angels.

I'm personally inclined towards the first interpretation, but the second also makes sense to me. You decide for yourself.

We're told this letter is to the church at Ephesus.

You might have heard about this church from the rest of the New Testament. It was in an important city in the Roman province of Asia.

The city of Ephesus itself was important economically, as it had a well placed harbour. It was also important spiritually as a centre for the worship of the goddess Artemis, and also for the worship of the Roman emperor.

The same Emperor Domitian who sent John to Patmos had a temple to himself built there in 89 or 90AD, presumably just before John was exiled.

When Paul visited the city in Acts 19, in the 50's A.D., he ended up having a falling out with Jews over the gospel of Jesus. He then moved his ministry to a local gymnasium, and continued teaching and preaching for two years.

The gospel had a profound effect on the spiritual community of Ephesus. We're told that many who practiced magic arts and sorcery publicly denounced their evil practices, and they burned their magic artefacts and spell books. We're told the value of what was burned was equivalent to 50,000 pieces of silver.

However, Paul's ministry came to an abrupt end when a jealous local who made silver idols saw Paul's ministry negatively affecting his business, that lucrative pivot-point between religion and business. After a near riot in the city, Paul left.

What we do know is that Paul continued to enjoy a great care and fondness for the church at Ephesus, and that through his ministry there, the gospel spread throughout the province of Asia, presumably to the other churches mentioned in Revelation 1-3.

So that's Ephesus.

2. The Characterisation (v1)

In v1, Jesus identifies himself in the terms of what John saw, specifically the one who,

"... holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands."

(Revelation 2:1 ESV)

Jesus himself told John in 1:20 exactly what the stars and the lampstands mean: *"the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."* (Revelation 1:20 ESV)

Stars, like lampstands, radiate light. The image is of the light of the gospel shining into a dark world through Jesus' messengers and through his church.

This helps us to understand the serious consequence for the church in Ephesus a little later, if they don't repent. Jesus says, *"I will remove your lampstand from its place"* (Revelation 2:5 ESV). Jesus will extinguish their witness in the world.

Notice what is added to the vision of Jesus. Here he "walks" among the lampstands. His presence among his churches is active, not static.

This description of Jesus brings with it a question that we'll have to ask of each church in turn: why is *this* description of Jesus particularly relevant for the Ephesian church? We'll try and answer that as we go along.

3. The Commendation (v2-3, 6)

Jesus' commendation of the church comes in v2-3, and in v6.

"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."

(Revelation 2:2–3 ESV)

Let's look at this first. The Ephesian church, according to Jesus, has a zero-tolerance policy towards imposters and false teachers. They will not tolerate false doctrine.

And despite the challenges of living in a progressive world city, where idol worship has a great presence, where commerce ranks as a god alongside Caesar and Artemis, they tirelessly maintain the purity of the church.

They have an unwavering allegiance to the name of Jesus. They are willing to be identified as followers of Jesus, whatever the cost. Like John, they are enduring patiently.

When Paul left Ephesus in Acts 20, he spoke to the church elders and said:

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

(Acts 20:29–31 ESV)

They have followed Paul's advice, and Jesus in this letter commends them for it.

If we jump down to v6, Jesus commends them yet further.

"Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

(Revelation 2:6 ESV)

It's hard to know exactly who this group were or what they believed, but it's clear that it wasn't the Biblical gospel. And Jesus commends their absolute intolerance of them.

Even after John sent his Revelation to the church in Ephesus, another Christian leader wrote to them and commended their unwillingness to tolerate false teachers:

“And indeed Onesimus himself greatly commends your good order in God, that you all live according to the truth, and that no sect has any dwelling-place among you. Nor, indeed, do you listen to any one rather than to Jesus Christ speaking in truth.”¹

“[Some were teaching] false doctrine, whom you did not allow to sow among you, but stopped your ears, that you might not receive those things which were sown by them.”²

They willingly endured suffering for their Lord, but refused to endure false doctrine.

But... there's a but.

4. The Condemnation (v4)

Jesus says in v4:

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

(Revelation 2:4 ESV)

The obvious question to ask is, “What does this actually mean?” What had they lost? In what way did they formerly demonstrate a love that is now lacking?

Former Bishop of North Sydney Paul Barnett asks the question in his book on Revelation:

“Had their initial enthusiasm for Jesus been replaced by a grim and defensive orthodoxy?”³

Though their zeal burned red hot, had their love for Jesus grown cold?

Still others suggest that the love they lacked was for one another. They loved Jesus (or passionately claimed to) but the love they knew in Christ was absent from their relationships with one-another.

So another Bible scholar says:

¹ 6., *Epistle to the Ephesians*, by St Ignatius

² 9., *Ibid.*

³ p.54, *Revelation: Apocalypse Now and Then*, by Pau Barnett, © 1989, Aquila Press
Grace Christian Church Buderim

“When hate for the practices of those who err becomes hatred of those who err, Christians depart from the redeeming love of God in Christ and pervert the faith.”⁴

Still another student of the book of Revelation suggests that we should take the vision of Christ given in v1 as the clear solution to their lost love. They were to consider the one who stood among the lamp stands of his churches shining out the light of the gospel upon a dark world as a sharp reminder of the love they had lost.

“The idea is that they no longer expressed their former zealous love for Jesus by witnessing to him in the world. This is why Christ chooses to introduce himself as he does in v1. His statement that he “walks in the midst of the lampstands” is intended to remind the introverted readers that their primary role in relation to their Lord should be that of a light of witness to the outside world.”⁵

So which is it? Have they lost their love for Jesus, for his people, or for his world?

Perhaps its all three? Perhaps they had a lost a fundamental love, and were zealously “doing” church, but failing to “be” the church. I think this is most likely.

Leon Morris, former principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, suggested:

“It may be that a general attitude is meant which included all three (‘you do not love as you did at first’, Phillips). Forsaken (*aphēkes*) is a strong term; they had completely abandoned their first fine flush of enthusiastic love. They had yielded to the temptation, ever present to Christians, to put all their emphasis on sound teaching. In the process they lost love, without which all else is nothing.”⁶

Now, there’s nothing wrong with sound teaching. There’s everything right with sound teaching. In fact, it’s essential to a healthy church. Jesus will not tolerate unsound teaching, and neither should we.

But it shouldn’t stop there. Sound teaching should motivate sound Christian living, which Jesus explained quite clearly when he summed up the Old Testament Law: You shall **love** the Lord your God, and you shall **love** your neighbour as yourself.

Remember that Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, that we looked at a few weeks ago.

⁴ p.1427, George R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition; ed. D. A Carson et al.; Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994)

⁵ p.230, *The Book of Revelation* (in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, Marshall, I.H. and Hagner, D.A., eds.), © 1999 Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁶ p.65, Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 20; IVP/Acordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987)

*“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.**”*

(1 Corinthians 13:2 ESV)

I believe there's a warning here to each one of us, and to our church at large.

I've heard so many people tell me that the reason they came to this church was because of the fine teaching. By God's grace, and despite human weakness, they have been blessed by the teaching ministry of Rick and myself, and Bob Burnett before us, and the many others who have been God's instruments in this pulpit.

We're a church which is known across the Sunshine Coast for sound teaching. But.... are we equally well known as a church that loves? Put it this way: I haven't ever heard anyone tell me that we are.

It's been said that there is a a million miles difference between knowing God and loving God.

I think it's a usual journey for a Christian. As you walk with Jesus for any length of time, you will steadily develop a hunger to know more of him, more of his Word.

But there is a danger that such a hunger can develop into a selfish appetite. We hunger to know more and more about God, rather than hungering to know more and more of God, how we can please him, how we can love him.

The availability of good, sound Bible teaching online is a two-edged sword in this regard. Whenever you want, you can access a library of teaching in audio, video and text, on any topic or part of the Bible you want, from a host of the best Bible teachers in the world.

As a Bible teacher, I'm acutely aware of this: you don't need to be here to listen to what I've got to say on a Sunday morning. You could stay in bed, take out your phone, and you could rather be listening to Timothy Keller, or John Piper, or John MacArthur, or R.C. Sproul!

There's nothing wrong at all with the teaching, it's Biblically sound — we wouldn't settle for anything less — but we still run the risk of simply becoming consumers of that teaching, or, as someone once said, 'connoisseurs of sermons'.

1 Corinthians 8:1 says, *“Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.”*

The question is always what we are doing with what we learn. Does it compel us towards more love for God, and more love for our neighbour, whether next door or in the next seat.

Perhaps we would do well to make a choice listen to fewer sermons, but to spend more time praying and reflecting on what have learned.

The Command (v5)

Let's move to the command Jesus gives this church. This is the solution to the lost love of the church in Ephesus:

“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.”

(Revelation 2:5 ESV)

There are three steps here

1. **Remember** from where you have fallen. Often, we can be blissfully ignorant of the true state of our hearts. I'm sure many of us would have had the experience of swimming or surfing at one of our beaches, and looking up after a while to see that we've drifted a long way from where we started without even realising. Here Jesus graciously and patiently commands the church to first stop and look for themselves where they are, and remember how close they were to God at the beginning compared to now.
2. **Repent.** This is the nuts and bolts of the command, which is why Jesus mentions it twice. Repentance is a radical inward and outward change in mind, judgement, will, affections, behaviour, lifestyle, motives and purpose. It is a result of faith in Jesus, and inseparable from faith in Jesus. It's about grieving for and hating our sin, turning away from our sin and towards God in Jesus Christ, to walk in his ways.
3. **Reform** - Do the works you did at first. Quite simply, start loving again. As I was reminded this week, love is a verb.

The consequence for not obeying Jesus' commands here is serious. He says he will “remove your lampstand.” I think this is the connection to the first verse. To see Jesus walking among the lampstands is to be reminded that he is Lord of the lampstands, Lord of the church, and he retains all authority over his church.

As much as the Ephesians will not suffer false teachers, Jesus will not suffer a loveless church that brings embarrassment to his name.

He will remove that church from its place, and no longer will it witness to the gospel love in word only.

It's a significant warning that Ephesus even as a city no longer exists, except as ruins for tourists to visit when they're in western Turkey. The city was destroyed twice: first by invading tribes in the 3rd century, and then by an earthquake in the 6th.

To those who conquer (v6)

Jesus finishes on a positive note:

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

(Revelation 2:7 ESV)

We've said before that to conquer, or to overcome, simply means to remain faithful to the end: either the end of one's life, or the return of Jesus, whichever comes first.

This is Jesus saying, "Don't give up now. The end is in sight, and with it, the reward."

Here Jesus declares that reward for those who conquer in terms of Revelation 22, where John sees a city, with a river flowing through it, and sin each side of the river:

"...the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him."

(Revelation 22:2-3 ESV)

This of course should send us back to Genesis 2:9, where we read that in the pre-sin garden paradise:

"The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

(Genesis 2:9 ESV)

The final line in this letter points forward to a restoration of all things under Jesus, and a restoration of what was lost in Eden when man sinned for the first time. In chapter three of Genesis we also learn that eating from the tree sustains eternal life.

There is more to say about the image of the tree than we have time for unfortunately. But this is what Jesus is holding out to the Ephesian Christians to motivation a return to love. Eternal life in paradise with God.

Conclusion:

This letter is a call to us all to take stock. How does our love for Jesus compare to the love we used to have for Jesus?

How does the love we used to have for our neighbour compare to the way we love our neighbour now?

We might not even realise that we have moved. But if we find we have moved from love, despite our appetite for the Word, despite our intolerance of anything but the Word, Jesus calls us to repent and reform.

Thomas Watson, who as you may know is a bit of a hero of mine, writing way back in the 1600's, said wisely:

“Love is the only thing in which we can retaliate with God ... We must not give him word for word, but we must give him love for love.”⁷

How about we pray:

⁷ John Blanchard, ed., *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Accordance electronic ed. New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.