



2. Too busy for God (Rev 2:1-7)

We started our new series last week with an amazing vision of the risen Christ to the elderly apostle as he faced exile on Patmos. And as he would have sat on Patmos, he would have reflected on the churches in the Roman province of Asia, a few miles away from where he was but where he was forbidden to return. In his vision, he receives messages for seven of them in particular: Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Broadly speaking the message is WAKE UP. They were all in dire danger and five of them needed stern words whilst two needed encouragement.

Let me recap for you the vision: *12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lamp stands, 13 and among the lamp stands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.*

If you came to the tabernacle sermons at the end of the last year, you'll find this picture interesting. The High Priest was dressed in a robe and had a sash. The High Priest had the overall responsibility of going into the most holy place and also tended the main part of the tabernacle which was illuminated by a lamp stand – the menorah. His responsibility was to ensure that the lamps were lit so the glory of the interior of the tabernacle could be seen day and night. The purpose of the menorah was to reflect the glory of God, if there was a problem with it then it was the High Priest's duty to do something about it, particularly to supply replacement lamps if they ceased to work properly.

The lamp stands in the vision stood for the seven churches of Asia. What does that tell you about their role? They were there as a light to reflect the glory of God. Matthew 5: *14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.* Just as Jesus is the Light of the World, we are the light of the world. How does Swaffham know that we are the people of God? Because it should shine out of us? And if it doesn't? The Great High Priest has to do something about it. That's what he was doing in the case of the seven churches.

Remember that vision over the next few weeks. It's important because the Lord alludes to parts of it in each of the letters. So what of the first of the seven to get their letter: Ephesus. It's interesting that Ephesus gets the part of the vision about the Lord holding seven stars and walking amongst the lamp stands. Out of all the cities in Asia, Ephesus was the jewel. It was a large bustling city with a huge shrine dedicated to the goddess Artemis (Diana). It was the star city and as we read the description of the church, we find that it sounds like a star church:

1. They worked hard and stuck in there. *I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.*
2. They were doctrinally sound and weeded out false doctrine and those who peddled it. *I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.*
3. Despite hardships, they had not grown weary in God's work. *You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.*

It all sounds like your perfect evangelical church. It was full of enthusiastic people doing God's work, took no nonsense with truth and despite problems, never gave up. If you saw that as the write up for a church, maybe you'd think "they sound like a thriving church; glorifying God." In fact it's a common perception. Churches gauge their life by the number of activities they do. Each letter starts with a compliment, some have a warning and each has a promise.

Maybe you're thinking – Ephesus is a good church they get away without one. Not so. What does the letter say? *If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place.* Jesus only says that to two churches – Ephesus and Laodicea. It is a threat of extinction. We are told that all but one of these towns (and therefore churches) no longer exist. But that isn't the point here. They were being threatened with extinction straight away!

What awful thing had they done to deserve this threat? *4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember the height from which 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.* Why was Ephesus church facing disaster? By modern standards they were a model church - but by God's standards they were failing, because they had left their first love.

And what does that mean? Do you remember when you first fell in love? I hope you do. It was exciting wasn't it. It was just enjoyable to be with the person you fell in love with. And all you wanted to do was please them and put aside your time to be with them. Sometimes when people have been married a while, perhaps the shine wears off a bit and we all know how marital difficulties affect people's lives. That joy of first love has gone. Maybe they've just become old and cynical, maybe it's a problem of trust, maybe it's just pressures of life.

That said, as someone married for coming up 24 years, love grows and it is possible to have that spark we had when we were younger despite all the things life may throw at us. We just need to be more aware of what can tear us away from one another and deal with them.

Cast your minds back to when you were first a Christian. For most people it was an exciting experience - like being in love. A time when God felt very real to you. A time when you had a thirst for God, a thirst for His word, a thirst to honour Him. You were in love with Him and desired to be with Him and please Him. That's what John is talking about that desire and joy to want to serve God because you have understood His love for you. But what happens if that wanes?

The Ephesians went through the motion - they were doing God's work without that passion for the things of God. They did some great stuff, even commendable stuff and they defended it like trojans - but God was not first in it - there was no passion for Him. They were probably quite legalistic and probably fought hard to keep their integrity and keep error out. But where was the love?

They had LEFT their first love. Many people say that the Ephesians had lost it. The wording is that they LEFT their first love. It means that they had abandoned their first love. Whatever their passion was, it had changed from God to something else.

Churches without passion, plod along by themselves but without God. They may be busy. They may pride themselves in all the things that they do. But by their fruit you know them. What honours God isn't what we do but in the way He is honoured in the fruit we produce. When churches go through the motions without the passion of their first love, then the fruit is thin. There a few who come to Christ, there is little desire to pray, worship goes through the motions, people have little time for studying God's word, and there is a firm desire to maintain moral purity and truth. They were too busy doing "God's work" to do what God wanted them to do and do it with passion! Alan Redpath called it "the barrenness of a busy life". So as we see churches in decline, we have to ask where their passion is. Have they left their first love - or done something worse like Sardis or Laodicea?

Even worse, when we're not in love with God, then we don't show His love. We may show our love for the church - churchianity. Or maybe the Bible - bibliolatry. We may be committed to truth. But are we committed to Him? Does our heart burn with a passion for honouring Jesus? Or is our passion for something else? When our passion is no longer for the things of God, we begin to drop from a great height. *Remember the height from which you have fallen!* An old Brethren commentator of my acquaintance said many years ago: *If we leave love out then "Christian work will become a form; the toil which love should lighten and inspire has become a burden; and the patient endurance which should be brightened by a glorious hope, has become a lifeless continuance"* Fred Tatford.

Where are we as a church this morning? Are we passionate to see God honoured in Swaffham?
What does our fruit look like?

You know, in the Way Forward, we may come up with all the plans and theories in the world for going forward and producing fruit, but in the end, it is our passion for God that is going to make the difference. If we're not in love with God, then we're not going to be in love with people and we're not going to love the lost. And by our fruit the whole world will know who we put first in our lives and our church. Philip Mauro has said: "the maintenance of the testimony of the church depends upon love for Christ, to whom the church belongs. What a challenge!

Despite their problem, Ephesus was commendable in the way they stood against the Nicolaitans. They were a group from what we can gather from Revelation, that flirted with the world, ate food offered to idols and generally were quite the opposite to the Ephesians. They have a marked similarity to the people Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. Why mention them? Being a believer who is passionately reaching out, isn't someone who sells to the world. The Nicolaitans offered another way which was a lure to the churches. They were passionate people but in the wrong sort of way.

7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God

How do I finish this morning? We are called to be overcomers. The issues are eternal ones in our lives and in the lives of those we would seek to reach. What as individuals are we most passionate about? Is it God? Do we want to spend time with Him? Do we want to please Him in how we live? Do we want our lives to bear fruit? Or has that early enthusiasm waned and we put our past feelings down to youthful exuberance? Have you left your first love? Your fruit bears testimony to you (and to everyone else).

As a church, what are we most passionate about? Is it God? Do we want to spend time together with Him? Do we want to please Him in how we worship and witness? Are we bearing fruit? Are we enthusiastic for the lost? Are people coming to Christ? Are believers growing and developing in their faith and gifts? Our fruit bears testimony to us (and everyone else).

Let's face facts. Our witness as a church leaves much to be desired. We can tweak a few things here and there, but in the end we have to say - are we still in love with Jesus? Or has it waned? We've struggled for a long time as a fellowship and the lamp stand has headed towards the door on more than one occasion. I believe God is prompting us through His word this morning to come to Him in repentance and do the things we did at first, because even now, He can make a difference in our fellowship and in Swaffham. In fact, repentance is the key to our moving forward.

As we come around the table, let's realize how we have fallen short of what we should be as believers and take an opportunity to repent and realize why God can forgive as we remember the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.

Hymn: When I survey