



REVELATION 2: THE FLAME OF LOVE

HOME GROUP NOTES

Last week we began a seven-week series looking through the whole of Revelation, a series we're calling One Found Worthy.

RECAP

I called us from the outset to clear away the wild distractions we often have with this book to instead read it in two ways: **by reading Revelation responsibly and prayerfully.**

We then read the first chapter of Revelation and considered the context of John's world in disarray with the beastly Roman Empire subjugating the nations, staggering the seven churches to compromise by worshipping Caesar, and confining John on the island of Patmos for his devotion to Jesus.

We observed, however, that the chaos surrounding John is suddenly invaded when he hears a Voice. John is commanded to write an urgent pastoral intervention to the seven churches he serves through a hybrid document of a letter, prophecy, and apocalypse: an understandable, now word for the churches to see heaven's perspective of their circumstances.

John then turns to see the Voice to discover that whilst he and the seven churches and even we may feel surrounded, together as God's people we are all surrounded by Jesus, the glorious Lord of heaven and earth.

That was Revelation I! What an opening!

Q: Any thoughts or questions from last week's session?

Jesus has got John's attention in Revelation I and now he directs his focus to the churches to call them to faithful witness: **a life ablaze to the glory of God, our topic today.**

Jesus addresses each church personally here in Revelation 2-3 and frames these messages in a similar way:

MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

CHURCH & ANGEL	CHRIST'S NAME	COMMENDATION	CRITICISM	COUNSEL	PROMISE
EPHESUS Revelation 2:1-7	Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands	Hard work, perseverance, rejected false teaching and practices	Rejected the love they had at first	Repent and do what you did at first	The tree of life
SMYRNA Revelation 2:8-11	Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again	Faithful under suffering		Remain faithful even to death	The crown of life
PERGAMUM Revelation 2:12-17	Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword	Perseverance	Tolerates immorality and idolatry	Repent	Hidden manna and a stone with a new name
THYATIRA Revelation 2:18-29	The Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze	The growth of their love, faith, service, and perseverance	Tolerates immorality and idolatry	Repent	Rule over the nations and receive the morning star
SARDIS Revelation 3:1-6	Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars	Some have remained faithful	A dead church	Repent by strengthening what remains	Will be dressed in white and be in the book of life
PHILADELPHIA Revelation 3:7-13	Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David	Perseverance		Keep the faith	A pillar in the temple of God
LAODICEA Revelation 3:14-22	The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation		Compromised to society and fruitless	Repent	Reign with Christ

Jesus begins curiously by calling John to write to the angel of each church. We know these messages are written primarily for the churches, but it is written also *for the attention of the angel of the church*.

Christ deems it necessary for his angelic sentry, posted to protect and preserve each church, to have eyes on this word, to be CC'd on this report because it will be of interest for them.

For if a church persists in ignoring Jesus, He will say to the angel – 'it's time to come home, they've chosen to be on their own.' And thus the church is left without heavenly protection. From the outset of each message, we can see that the response from the church is very serious.

Q: What do you make of this?

Q: Where have you seen St. Philip's protected or blessed over the years?

Jesus then introduces himself to each church as their glorious Lord, in a particular way that each church needed to hear, and in a way that connects with what Jesus goes on to talk about.

Jesus then pronounces these sobering words to each church:

'I know your deeds!'

Jesus' total knowledge of the churches motivates his thorough examination of them because He loves them, and He wants to direct every aspect of their life together to thrive to the glory of God.

He does so by offering commendation, showing where each church exhibits faithfulness just as he is the true and faithful witness.

But He also must call out the areas of their lives that hold them back, and even for some churches diagnose the cancerous growth that has permeated their community, demanding swift surgical action through His subsequent instruction.

Jesus then ends by essentially posing the question: will you overcome? Will you conquer? And He spurs on the churches to listen to the Spirit and remain faithful to Him with a motivating promise of their glorious future.

As we read these messages from Jesus to seven churches, we detect some churches are doing better than others.

Smyrna and Philadelphia, for example, receive no rebuke from Jesus. They're exemplary! Whereas Laodicea receives no commendation. They make Jesus feel sick!

This startling examination is brought home when we realise these messages reach further than the seven alone who, due to the symbolism of the number 7, function also as representatives of every church in history, and thus become a litmus test to the quality of every church.

Jesus therefore speaks *to* these churches and *straight through* these churches to diagnose our life together as St. Philip's.

Q: Have you ever had experience in a church of the Spirit dramatically calling for a new way of being together?

Strap yourself in as we explore the first message from Jesus to the church in Ephesus to hear what the Spirit is saying to St. Philip's:

READ REVELATION 2:1-7

“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. ² I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. 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 false. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 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 lampstand from its place. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

We’re told here that the church in Ephesus is one light held within the seven-branched golden lampstand that Jesus walks amongst. This is a very important image for us to dwell on today.

THE CHURCH AS LAMPSTAND

This lampstand was the sacred item called the Menorah.

If you were an Israelite during the time of Moses, with this lampstand was perpetually lit by the high priest in tent tabernacle in the wilderness to show God’s love, presence, and power continually with them.

This lampstand was also the shape of a tree, symbolising the tree of life in Eden. The lampstand housed in a tent where the Lord’s presence dwelled and furnished with an intricate tapestry of flowers and animals was thus a foretaste to Israel of God’s plan to establish a new Eden and heal the world.

In this message to Ephesus, however, Jesus reveals the church as the lampstand are carriers of the fire of God’s Spirit in the world. We are the holy place where God dwells and a taste of Eden where God’s delight and goodness abounds.

It follows, as we’ll discover later in Revelation, that because this is who we are the impact of our faithful witness to the world in the end has a transformative effect far beyond anything we can imagine. And it is Jesus, walking amongst the lampstands, who ensures that the church continues to extend His appeal, as His ambassadors, for the world to come back to its Creator.

Q: How do you perceive the significance of the church today?

Q: Do you see evidence of the church ablaze?

Q: Where do you see fruitfulness in St. Philip’s?

JESUS AS HIGH PRIEST

We see Jesus therefore acting like a High Priest in the tabernacle or temple tending to its flame. He is keeping the oil topped up and trimming the charred wick so that the lampstand — these seven churches and all churches — remains ablaze with a clear light to shine in the darkness!

Jesus, as High Priest, is ultimately responsible and actively working to preserve the fire and fruitfulness of the church. Jesus builds *his* church.

Jesus fills us with His Spirit, he comforts us, he continually intercedes for us, in constant dialogue with the Father for our welfare and he refines our lives! He does this here as we gather and throughout the everyday — beyond the reach of any leader or meeting or programme.

This is so liberating for those of us involved in any form of leadership in this church. It can free us from a crushing burden to preserve and renew St. Philip's. In fact, everyone one of us has a part to play, we're a kingdom and priests to serve God as we learn in Revelation, but we don't play the most important part - that's Jesus responsibility as High Priest.

Q: In what ways have we sensed Jesus shaping our own lives outside the setting of a church gathering?

Q: Do we feel confident that Jesus is actively tending to the health of St. Philip's?

Q: Have we ever assumed more responsibility for the ministry and mission of St. Philip's than we need to? Why?

So as the leader of the church, Jesus highlights how Ephesus is ablaze, how they have walked and worked with him:

EXAMINING EPHEBUS

Jesus commends Ephesus for their active faith, their pursuit of holiness by rejecting voices, people and practices that seek to lead them astray, and their perseverance in the face of suffering wrought from a hostile Roman culture.¹ This pleases Jesus' heart.

But Jesus corrects them for neglecting the love they had at first, which if not rectified, will have disastrous consequences for the church.

We read of their first love over thirty years earlier as a new church in Ephesians I when the Apostle Paul says to them:

15 *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*

The Apostle Paul then ends his letter to the Ephesians extending grace to the church who love the Lord with an undying love.

This church emerged early on as a people who lived out the greatest commandment with a love for one another and the Lord. They were a marvel to Paul.

¹ The Nicolaitans are criticised several times by Jesus in Revelation 2-3. It is believed they were an influential movement of Christians who advocated for fellow Christians to participate in Roman religious practices and settings of eating food offered to Roman gods.

From this glorious experience, however, they had fallen from a great height. This has a possible connection to the inference of Satan, in Isaiah 14, falling from the heights of heaven. Satan traded his proximity to the loving presence of God for his own agenda resulting in his destructive and accusatory work in the world.

Over some time, the church in Ephesus has made a similar lucifer fall. A love that first characterised the church has been lost and now there is a climate of discontent, suspicion, accusation, and mistrust. It means their life together is fading.

Q: That is a big fall! How does a church make such a transition from a marvel to a monstrosity?

REMOVING THE LAMPSTAND

If the church does not soon change and join Jesus in rekindling the flame of love to the Lord and one another, Jesus will remove their container from the lampstand as the church their light ceases to burn.

So, the idea of our lampstand being removed likely has two senses. In Christ's judgement:

- 1) A loveless church withers and dies, eventually ceasing to be a congregation
- 2) If it remains a congregation, it does not contain the fire of God's Spirit to impact the world, and may even devolve into resembling nothing like a Christian church at all.

Jesus conveys this similar idea in John 15 stating,

⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command [therefore] is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

Q: Do we see such a thing happening in our nation?

Q: May there be other factors at play for why a church withers?

The church in Ephesus did respond to Jesus and for centuries it continued to be one of the most significant centres of Christian witness in the world. But if you visit the city today in Turkey you will find no active Christian presence.

NT Wright says:

'That would have been almost as unthinkable to John's audience as it would be for us to imagine our great churches empty and in ruins, with no new Christian fellowships rising up to take their place.

But this sense of devastation, of a place where there once was a thriving Christian witness but where there is no more, is precisely what Jesus warned the Ephesian church about in verse 5: 'If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand out of its place.'²

² N.T Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (London: SPCK), 11.

This shows that each generation is to reckon with this word afresh, as are we at St. Philip's.

If our experience of St. Philip's, however, is leading to resentment, accusation, and mistrust of others, as well as a dwindling love of Christ, we are called here to rekindle the flame of love before it's too late.

Jesus adds his incentive for us not to grieve the Holy Spirit and instead make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, as the church in Ephesus were once commanded to do.

Christ earmarks His choice blessing for us from the New Eden described in the last pages of Revelation. Our experience of the Lord now, as a foretaste of Eden, will be superseded by the full reality of His presence in the world – and we will receive from Him the produce of the tree of life that forever yields its harvest. What a promise!

So will we overcome?

Those with ears, hear what the Spirit is saying to St. Philip's. Amen.

Prayer Time

This is an exposing word. It may reveal or challenge certain emotions and reactions we have towards others in the congregation or even to God.

We read in Hebrews 4:

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,¹⁴ Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Let's approach the God of grace in prayer for our time of need, asking for his mercy.

Extra Resources

If you would like to continue your own exploration of Revelation through these weeks or in the future, here are some helpful resources worth looking into.

For an overview of the whole of Revelation check out these fantastic videos from the Bible Project.

Part 1: <https://youtu.be/5nvVVcYD-0w?feature=shared>

Part 2: <https://youtu.be/QpnIrbq2bKo?feature=shared>

The Bible Project have also released a creative video on how to read Apocalyptic Literature:

<https://youtu.be/UNDX4tUdjIY?feature=shared>

If you want to go in a bit deeper, a good place to start is NT Wright's commentary, *Revelation for Everyone*, which explains the meaning of each chapter of Revelation in bitesize portions. A more devotional book, beautifully written, is from a hero of mine, Eugene Peterson, called *Reversed Thunder*.

A little more complex but great nonetheless are the books, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* by Michael J. Gorman which debunks a lot of unhelpful stuff we bring to this book and draws into sharper focus what the book is about. Then *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham is possibly the best book on Revelation I have read. It's a small book covering the major themes of Revelation, it may keep you own your toes as it is quite academic, but it led me to worship more than any other book on the topic I have read! There is also a commentary called *Revelation and the End of All Things* by Craig Koester which is very helpful in exploring the meaning of each chapter in greater depth than say NT Wright's book.

Lastly, if you want to explore the book word-by-word check out *Revelation (Anchor Yale Bible)* by Craig Koester or Ian Paul's *Revelation (TNTC)*.

Revelation 1:3

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it...