

Keeping the Romance Alive

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Date: 07 June 2020

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[0 : 00] Ollie and Sal were the coolest Christians we knew. When they appeared in our church, they were like a breath of fresh air.

Their cottage was full of interesting objects which they had collected from their travels around the world. They were environmentally conscious long before their estimates.

They were intelligent. They were practical. An invitation to dinner or supper at their place was an invitation to an adventure.

Now, because Ollie was a landscape gardener, they were offered a house in the grounds of a new Christian retreat centre where he had free range to develop the grounds, holistically and environmentally, of course.

It was the ideal place for them to raise their young son. Now, I got my first charge and it's the way things go.

[1 : 01] We move away and we hardly see each other. And then to utter amazement, we heard the news. Ollie had left Sal.

We couldn't believe it. He'd had an affair and he walked out on her. If ever a couple went in love, it was them. But it seems that Ollie's love for Sal had waned.

He just didn't love her anymore. Well, this evening we're going to hear about the Lord Jesus accusing the church in Ephesus of having lost their love for him.

Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love. Apparently, a church can go through the motions of being a church and yet be devoid of love for Jesus.

And that can only happen when the individuals who comprise that congregation have the same experience, when their love for Jesus evaporates.

[2 : 11] Now, this morning we considered John's description of Jesus. I was saying it's not a photographic description, but a theological description. So, this evening I want to look at this first of the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia.

The letter to the church in Ephesus. And let me begin by telling a wee bit about the church in Ephesus itself. Now, Ephesus was located on the west coast of Turkey, looking out over the Aegean Sea to Greece.

As the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire, it was a major financial centre, and it was a home of the Pan-Ionian Games, which were a sporting event second only to the Olympics.

It was home to the worship of the goddess Artemis, or Diana as the Romans called her. She was a goddess of fertility, with religious rites to match.

Her temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. They used to say that the sun saw nothing finer as it went through its course during the day than the temple of Artemis.

[3 : 28] Ephesus also had the honour of leading the way in emperor worship. Domitian, the emperor, where in Revelation was written, named Ephesus the guardian of the imperial cult.

The apostle Paul was a keen strategic thinker, and therefore it's no surprise that on his missionary journeys he deliberately included Ephesus in his itinerary.

And a church was born there. Paul spent two and a half years building up the church in Ephesus. That's the longest he's spent in any one place.

Verse 1 begins the letter, and there's a description of Jesus. These are the words of him who woees the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Now that description of Jesus comes from back in chapter 1, verses 12 and 16. But there's actually a subtle change there, because the word for holds is now changed to mean holds tight.

[4 : 33] Holds tight. Verse 20, back in chapter 1, tells us the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. The church at Ephesus is being assured of the Lord's tight grip on them.

The seven golden lampstands were the menorah, the seven branch lamps that gave light to the temple. And again, chapter 1, verse 20 tells us that they represent the churches.

Why? Why? Because the role of the church is to give light in the world. Jesus told his disciples, you are the light of the world. And he also said, let your light shine before men.

Jesus walking among the golden lampstands means that he is right there in the midst of his church. Not outside looking in, not above looking down.

He is right here. Now, it seems that the church in Ephesus needed to take care of that. They needed to be reassured that Jesus was in charge and that he was with them.

[5 : 42] And no wonder, look where they lived. The worship of the goddess Artemis basically made a religion out of sex. And Ephesus reaped the benefit of keeping the emperor Domitian happy.

A happy emperor was good for business. Anyone refusing to declare their loyalty to him, that he was their Lord and their God, was a threat.

A threat to the prosperity of the city. So it wasn't easy being a Christian in Ephesus. You stood out as being different. They needed to be sure that Jesus was Lord and that he was worth all the suffering and all the inconvenience.

Well, because he is with them, Jesus can say to them, if he does it in verse 2, I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.

This was a busy church. There was children's ministry, youth ministry, Bible study groups, prayer meetings, ministry to the elderly, ministry to the poor, ministry to the sick.

[6 : 49] It was all happening in Ephesus. I know your perseverance, says Jesus. Times were hard for Christians in Ephesus. They had to face strong and relentless opposition to their faith.

Their refusal to join in emperor worship or to enjoy a day out with the boys at the temple of Artemis. That would have cost them jobs. It would have affected their business.

It could have cost them customers. Verse 3. You have persevered and endured hardship for my name and have not grown weary.

And have not grown weary. I wonder, have you grown weary of serving Jesus? Do you sometimes feel like giving up?

Giving up on Jesus? You've served him all your life. You've worked hard for the church. You've sacrificed time and money and effort. Maybe even career prospects for the kingdom of Christ.

[7 : 54] But hey, it doesn't seem to have got you anywhere. The blessings you expected have not materialized. The rewards that you expected have never arrived. It's been hard work and hardship.

Right now, perhaps, you feel like giving up on Jesus. This word from the Lord to the Ephesians reminds us that he sees it all.

He sees it all. He sees your hard work. He sees your perseverance. It's not like those bosses that just take their workers for granted. They never notice the hours of overtime you're putting in.

I know your deeds, says Jesus. I know. I know. And there's more to commend the Christians in Ephesus in verse 2.

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 to be false. When it came to Christian truth, the Ephesians were on the wall.

[9 : 04] When it came to Christian doctrine, they were straight down the line, sound as a bell. The Lord Jesus had warned his disciples to look out for false prophets.

Wolves and sheep, sconing he'd call them. And Paul himself actually had warned the Ephesian elders back in Acts chapter 20. It's chapter 20 verse 29. The apostle Paul had warned the Ephesian elders to be on their guard against preachers whose teaching would distort the truth.

So whenever a new preacher stood in the field put in Ephesus, the church members had their Bibles open in front of them. They weren't impressed with robes and a dog collar.

They wanted to be sure for themselves that what they were hearing was squarely based on scripture. They wanted to be sure that what this preacher taught was consistent with what they heard from the apostle Paul.

Friends, I don't know if you're aware that the modern church is very suspicious of doctrine. Very suspicious of people who make a fuss about doctrine.

[10 : 22] Doctrine divides, they say. It's so arrogant to claim that you are right and somebody else is wrong. Let's agree to disagree. The Ephesians would have begged to differ.

What if the difference of opinion is about how we are saved from our sins? What if the difference of opinion is over the authority of the Bible in our lives? What if the difference of opinion is about who Jesus really is?

Of course, there are peripheral matters which we should not follow over. But there are certain points of doctrine which are fundamental to who we are and what we believe.

In verse 6, down in verse 6, Jesus says to the Ephesians, But you have this in your favour. You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans which I also hate.

Now who the Nicolaitans were and what we believe has been lost in the midst of time. But clearly they were advocating something that was in blatant contradiction to everything that the Ephesians had been taught.

[11 : 33] So the Lord Jesus commends the Ephesians for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans. You see, my friends, it is right.

It is proper to hate, to detest false teaching. It leads people astray.

It robs them of gospel truth. And ultimately, of course, it deprives them of heaven. What a great church! A busy church!

Doctrinally sound, just like Bonacord and Aberdeen. A great church! What could there be to criticise? What? And yet the Lord Jesus says, Yet I hold this against you.

You have forsaken your first love. You have forsaken your first love. What does he mean, forsaken your first love? Does he mean himself? Does he mean that they have lost their love for Jesus himself?

[12 : 40] Yes! That's what he means. But how can he say that? How can he say that they no longer love him? Look at their deeds! Look at their hard work!

Look at their perseverance in the face of opposition! How can he say that their love for him has gone for court? But then, does not Paul say, in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, let's just take verse 3, If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

It is possible to go through the motions of Christian discipleship and be devoid of love.

It is possible to go through the motions of Christian commitment and do so with a cold, heartless, loveless spirit.

It is possible to do it all as a duty. Visiting the sick, teaching in the Sunday school, attending the prayer meeting, responding to appeals, not because you want to, but because you feel you ought to.

[14 : 02] It is a duty. This is your Christian duty. Oh, I imagine that it wasn't always like that. There was a time when you first came to faith when you just couldn't get enough.

You just couldn't get enough. You couldn't wait for Sunday to come around. You could have developed your Bible. The prayer was the next best thing to be in heaven itself. You were thrilled to be able to dip into your pocket and help the Lord's work financially.

It was like being in love. It was being in love. It was being in love with the Lord Jesus. You loved him because you were so conscious of his love for you.

It's as John says back in chapter 1, verse 5, to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. You were so conscious of the love that Jesus had shown you on the cross that nothing was a bother to you.

But what about now, my friend? What about now? Now? Grace doesn't seem so amazing after all. Yeah, you still believe and you still go through the motions of coming to church and you put in your offering and you sign up for whatever's going on.

[15 : 26] But if it weren't there, would you really miss it? Well, hang on. It isn't there. Are you missing it? Are you missing church? Are you missing everything that goes along with serving the Lord?

Are you missing it? And what do you miss? Do you actually miss worship? Or is it just seeing your friends? The Christians in Ephesus were going through the motions of being church. anyone looking in from the outside would have been impressed. Jesus wasn't looking in from the outside. He walked among them.

He knew. He knew. I'll tell you how he knew. How can you tell when a couple are no longer in love? You never see them together. You never see them together. Whereas before they were inseparable, now they're never seen together.

[16 : 39] Well, in verse 5, Jesus threatens to remove their lampstand. And what does that tell us? It tells us that the Ephesians had stopped shining for Jesus.

They had stopped witnessing for Christ. they were not doing what the church should be doing, being light. So the Lord Jesus will remove the symbol of what being a church is all about.

This is just my guess, but I guess that the Ephesians had become introverted in order to survive, in order to minimize the threat from the world outside.

They focused on themselves. That's why they were so hot on doctrine. The barricades were up. No outside force could penetrate. But the walls were so high the gospel could never get out.

I want to ask again, is this a word for you? Is this a word for you? You who are so busy with church work, when was the last time you ever shared the gospel with someone?

[17 : 49] is this a word for Bonacord Free Church of Scotland? Reforms, evangelical, Bible believing. But if I have not love, I am nothing.

My friends, if Jesus is speaking to you this evening, listen to what he says. Remember the height from which you have fallen. remember, remember the height from which you have fallen.

That's one of the reasons Christ gave us the sacraments, baptism and Holy Communion, they remind us of Christ's love for us and how we first responded to that love.

Like the prodigal son falling in the mud with the pigs, bring to mind how wonderful life was with your father, how generous and kind and loving he was to you.

Remember what you have lost and now long for and then repent, repent. Say to yourself, I will arise and go to my father.

[19 : 07] I promise you this, you will find him waiting. You will find him waiting. And Christ's promise, verse 7, to him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.

The fruit of the tree of life which was forbidden to Adam and Eve is given to you. Life eternal life.

I don't want to finish without just making one last comment. I've been speaking about love for the Lord Jesus and perhaps I have, by God's grace, stoked up a flame in some hearts, hearts which once were passionate for Jesus but that flame is now on the wane.

love for the Lord Jesus in the way that I've just described. Absolutely never.

The very thought of loving Jesus is actually a foreign thought to you. Friends, love for the Lord Jesus is the very heartbeat of the Christian faith.

[20 : 24] Our faith is not about what we do and what we don't do. it's about love. It's not about duty. It's about love. To know Jesus is to love Jesus and to love Jesus is to know Jesus.

And if you have not loved, loved for the Lord Jesus, it has all been for nothing. Absolutely nothing.

All the deeps, all the hard work, all the perseverance, all for nothing.

Jesus loved you. How can you not love him? He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Let's pray together. Our God and our Father, there can be no doubt of your love for us.

We pray that our love for you, for our Saviour Jesus, would be strong and intense. Lord, it is my chief complaint that my love is weak and faint, but I love thee and adore.

[21 : 42] Oh, for grace to love thee more. Through our Saviour Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. Amen.