

**June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012: 7 churches: "The Worse Thing A Church Can Lose"**  
**Revelation 2:1-7**

As some of you would know Albert and Mary Cooper are at present in Turkey on holiday. Their aim is to visit some of the cities referred to in the New Testament as having churches, especially those mentioned in the 7 letters of Revelation. Before they went I had already been thinking about a series of messages based on those letters and their going was a further catalyst to do so. Consequently today we turn to the first of the seven letters that was sent to Ephesus.

Ephesus is a 'must see' for tourists who visit that area for it is the best preserved of all the ancient cities of the Eastern Mediterranean. It's ruins are amazing and they tell a little of the story of this great and prosperous city. At its zenith it was renowned for the glory of the Temple to Dianna that dominated it, the harbor and trade routes through it that gave it such great wealth and the amazing sports arena that could seat 260,000. It's population was around the 250,000 mark and its inhabitants were mainly prosperous, devotees of Dianna, and extremely proud of their cities prominence.

The church at Ephesus was founded by Paul who spent three years there teaching the believers. It clashed very early on with the Jewish leaders and later on with the materialistic side of the cult of Dianna through the oppositions of the silver smiths led by Demetrius. Christians in that church knew about persecution. It was the main receiver of what we know as the New Testament book of Ephesians. The church in which Timothy and then, towards the end of his life, John the Apostle ministered, and it is said that John died there after his release from the prison island of Patmos.

The letter in Revelation chapter two is not a bad letter. It was written by the Lord Jesus to His precious and loved people. He reveals Himself to them as the Triumphant and Victorious Lord of heaven and earth who speaks through His angel or church Pastor directly to them.

Particularly He is the one who walks amongst the golden lamp stands which are the churches. He is always in their midst protecting and keeping them in His hand. Jesus is no absentee Lord. He is always present in our midst and nothing is hidden from Him. He is here in every service, every prayer time, every ministry, and every fellowship moment, even as He is with every

believer in every home, work place and social gathering. We are never alone as a church body or as individuals. Because of this He knows us just as well as He knew that church at Ephesus for nothing about us is hidden from His eyes. And if He were to write a letter to us we could be sure that He would start with the good that He sees in us, for that's how He began His letter to the church at Ephesus. Revelation 2:2 says(CEV)

***<sup>2</sup> I know everything you have done, including your hard work and how you have endured. I know you won't put up with anyone who is evil. When some people pretended to be apostles, you tested them and found out that they were liars. <sup>3</sup> You have endured and gone through hard times because of me, and you have not given up.***

These things pleased Jesus. The Greek word for hard work used here refers to work that exhausts a person or a group. Endured means the type of fortitude that rises above the hard times and never gives in. Their commitment to ministry in Jesus' name was great, and when you remember that this was a time of persecution for Christians throughout the Roman Empire such a testimony is praise worthy. And in particular Jesus noted their passion for keeping the Faith pure from the attacks of false teachers and disruptive groups that abounded during that time.

These characteristics of the church at Ephesus were not bad or reprehensible. Indeed we are given a picture of a hardworking unit, that was strong in its discernment of falsehood, rigid in its opposition to what was wrong, and courageous against attacks. Yet there is this one black mark on their record that is so huge that it threatens to destroy them completely. One virtue that they no longer prioritize or practice—their first love. Indeed in the view of Jesus they have deliberately put it aside and in so doing they have hurt their Lord so much, for it is the One virtue that God the Son constantly emphasized, lived His life by, and commanded of His followers.

So the Lord says to this energetic and correct church, I have this problem with you, and unless you do something about it I will remove your lamp stand from this place. You will no longer be my witness here, for you have deliberately lost your first love.

In my title today I ask the question, "What is the Worst Thing a Church Can Lose?" and I would encourage you to think about that for a moment.

It is not numbers or certain age groups for the Lord can work through many or few.

It's not the Pastor or having Bibles for everyone—the persecuted church in China proved that.

It's not buildings, money or prestige. It's Love. The Love that is of God. Unconditional and powerful that does not need to Like in order to Act. Love that this church at Ephesus once had and lived by, but had now abandoned.

Their motivation for worship of God and ministry for Him was no longer love of God. It may have become an obligation, a habit, a way of meeting people or gaining prestige: We are not told, but we know that the love that once motivated them did so no longer.

Their priority as far as fellow believers and non believers were concerned was no longer to love them as Christ had first loved them. It may have been to care for and be friendly towards those they liked and respected but even with them it was not the love that has no limits, that springs from a heart in love with Jesus which seeks first His delight and joy.

Such a charge on the part of Christ to this church at Ephesus is one that every church today needs to be aware of. For it is so easy to forget that it is the Love of God that brought us salvation from hell's torment, and it must be that same love that now constrains us to worship and to love others.

We need to ask ourselves anew: What brought me here to worship God this morning when I could so easily be elsewhere? And according to Jesus your response should not be the music, or the preaching, or the fellowship, or the habit of doing so, but your love for God if you are a believer in Him. When that love by itself is not enough, then it becomes just so easy to discover an excuse to miss worship or a reason to complain about things that don't suit you.

The same stands for the way we show love for other believers. When we come into this place on a Sunday morning what governs who we sit next to, or who we talk to, or who we look out for, or who we decide to visit, or invite home for lunch, or give our valuable time to? Is it the love of Christ that needs no introduction to seek out a stranger and no sense of liking before assisting one in need. Or have we become so blinkered that all we see are

the people we want to see and the needs we feel confident and comfortable to deal with.

"First Love" can go missing so easily from a church or a heart. That's why we must do the three things Jesus mentioned in v5:-

***<sup>5</sup> 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 lampstand from its place.***

Remember the times of Great joy when we have been so moved by love for God in our worship and service and yearn for them again. The times when reading His word and praying and worshipping were our priority and we would never think of missing them. The desire we used to have to share about Jesus and to give of ourselves in His service. If we are still as passionate then remembering will only increase that passion. If our passion has begun to fade then we need to do the second thing and REPENT.

A word that simply means to turn around and make a decision to worship, serve, and help others out of a heart filled with love for God and for them.

This then in turn leads on to the third thing which is to Do. Everything else will mean little unless you make the decision right now to Do those acts that arise out of love. Ask the Holy Spirit right now to point you towards someone who needs you to love them as Christ loved you, and then make the decision to do. Formulate a plan for them and begin to follow it through before this day is done.

As a Church we can't afford to be without this Love that first gripped our hearts the moment we accepted God as our Saviour. It must motivate our ministries and our relationships and it must always be reaching out to others and growing. For that to happen we need to work at overcoming the things that hinder us, be it our attitudes towards others, our shyness, our hardness of heart towards certain people, or our unwillingness to sacrifice of ourselves in worship.

Such overcoming is never easy but the final promise in this letter makes it all worthwhile.

***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.***

