

## Faraway Familiar City Scenes: Touring the Early Church in 7 Cities Message 5 – Ephesus

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### **EPHESUS: THE GOOD CHURCH THAT FORGOT TO LOVE**

If I was independently wealthy (which I'm not) – or if I had an unlimited conference budget (which I don't) – it would be possible to spend my entire year going from one conference to another – there are conferences today on almost every subject relating to church life and ministry.

This morning we do have enough imaginary budget money – and so I would like to take you with me to a church conference – we're off to Turkey – we are going to visit a successful and exciting church.

The church is located in the city of Ephesus – and there are some pretty impressive people on the church roll. Founded by the apostle Paul – Timothy was one of the young pastors of this church. Tradition says that he was murdered by the Romans – and so the man that we know as the Apostle John became the pastor of the church. While he was there at this church - he wrote his marvelous Gospel – by the time Revelation was written – Ephesus had become the center of the Christian movement – it had started in Jerusalem - moved to Antioch – then on to Ephesus.

One more fact about this church – one of its members was Mary – the mother of Jesus – she had moved there with the Apostle John when Jesus from the cross asked him to look after his mother. Can you imagine singing Christmas carols with Mary in the congregation?

What a church this was! – founded by the Apostle Paul – pastored by Timothy – Mother of Jesus there.

The New Testament gives us three installments about this church – each at a different stage in its life and development.

– the first is when it was being founded and formed – actually in the midst of a riot in Ephesus over a goddess called Artemis and the craftsmen who made silver idols for sale in the gift stores around the Temple – Acts 19/20.

Second installment is in the letter to this church – if we ever needed a single handbook to tell us what the church should be about — it is Ephesians – it lifts us high to tell us that we have been chosen before the foundation of the world - how the church is central to the plan and the mind of God – Ephesians teaches us how to be an international church - it teaches us how to live like a Christian – it calls us to love and love sacrificially in the most intimate of human relationships -

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how to arm and protect ourselves to fight the battle in the world – but unpacking all of that is for another time.

In Revelation –which is the third installment – we are given the insight and diagnosis that Jesus makes about this church – as we would expect – Jesus does not just see what is on the outside – Jesus is able to see what lies on the inside. So Jesus walks among this church one day – he is like a divine quality control inspector – he sees more than just what is on the outside – he sees what the church is like on the inside – more than anyone – he can scrutinize what is really going on.

Reading -- [Revelation 2:1-7](#)

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH DO WE GET WHEN WE MAKE SERVICE A PRIORITY?

Well – you get a church that is buzzing with activity – you sense that as soon as you go into the door.

Three words help us to see this.

1 - Your deeds – everyone had a job – as soon as you arrived at this church – you were getting signed up for something. Everyone was needed. Ephesians never uses “I” – it is always “WE”. They understood what it says – Ephesians 4 *12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up*

*13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Working together is related to growth towards maturity. Bonhoeffer –*A community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them.* OUCH!

2 – Your toil – word means that people are willing to put their backs in it.

3 – your perseverance – a strong word – you don't quit – in this church people don't start something and then quit – you got a job based on your gifts and passions and you stayed with it.

So you can imagine this church conducting leadership conferences on how you did that – how you get more people involved – how you increase the ratio of volunteers.

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WHAT KIND OF CHURCH DO WE GET WHEN WE MAKE TEACHING A PRIORITY?

(Revelations 2:2) *I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men...*

This vital dimension of church stamina was part of the DNA of this church – it was formed in them at its very birth.

In Ephesus was the Temple of Artemis – Ephesus was a centre for false teaching – all kinds of distortions of truth were taking place. Ephesus was awash in religious syncretism – cults grew like weeds. The cultic worship of the Temple of Artemis/Diana cast a shadow over everything. It was not easy to be a Christian and to stay true to the faith against this kind of pressure – but this church demonstrated it could be done – it stood as an example of faithfulness. When Paul was leaving this church after 3 years of ministry – this was his word to their elders/leaders;

Acts 20

*27 For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*

*28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

*29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.*

*30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.*

*31 So be on your guard!*

Persecution comes from outside – apostasy from inside.

This church was born in a crucible of cultic confusion and religious syncretism – if these Christians were going to survive – they would need to know God's truth found in his word.

When you read the letter to the Ephesians you see that they did.

1 – truth teaches us doctrine – it lays the rails of truth in our lives — Today in Vancouver just as in Ephesus – there is a cacophony of spiritual voices- all trying to lure us away – voices that say all we need are experiences – well, experiences are nice – but they are not our foundation.

I am well aware that people today are looking for and seek experiences before intellect – those ideas that challenge and change the mind — feelings are

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important – I get deeply troubled when Christians put feelings and experiences -- first but we are not to be controlled or change by feelings – we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. This leads to what is called the development of the Christian mind – which is the ability to think Christianly about everything.

2 – truth is moral – it defines the path in which we are to walk and live. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path – in other words it defines the way we are to walk in a moral sense – this idea of walking is used in Ephesians – it means how we are to live.

It also helps us to make a moral stand in our culture – Ephesians 6

*11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.*

*17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

3 – truth is relational – it is the solid ground upon which we establish and nurture relationships.

We often quote Ephesians 4 – speaking the truth in love – actually = truing in love. This does not mean we can give anyone we want to a piece of our mind – so long as we say we are doing it in love.

*29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

As a church – we make no apology for walking out a commitment to the Bible as a basis for truth in our lives. The only thing that will ultimately change the minds of people is the word of God and the Spirit of God.

So Ephesians is an exemplary evangelical church – lots of ministries to meet every need – holding to the truth in the midst of pluralism. In every way was a flagship church.

All of us have been in conversations with people that seem to be going pretty well until the other person says – BUT.... Then you know that the dialogue is going to change direction. That is exactly what Jesus does –

Yet I hold this against you – you have forsaken your first love. At its very heart – this must mean our love for God.

*The Shema – Deuteronomy 6.*

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*4. Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*

*5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

How can this be in a church in which things are going so strong and so well?  
What happened? Can this happen to us – the answer is YES.

Perhaps the answer to how it happened lies in the awareness that in every strength there lies an inherent weakness – every success holds the seeds of its own destruction.

### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE SERVE WITHOUT LOVE?

It turns into spiritual pride – look at all I am doing – we begin to think that we are indispensable.

It turns into spiritual workaholicism – the love and passion that started something becomes a drudgery and a chore when we disconnect love from serving.

Depending on our personality style – some people just quit – they give up – a different personality style keeps going – dogged persistence – a kind of martyr complex falls upon them.

Duty makes us do things well – love makes us do things beautifully.

It leads to spiritual burnout – we may wonder why someone who was so committed suddenly just walks away – packs it all in – they never return to church or to Christian service. I have known several pastors who did that. But if you look back and trace the steps – you can understand why.

Service to God without love for God quickly becomes idolatry.

### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE HOLD ONTO TRUTH WITHOUT LOVE?

1 – it creates a rigid spirit – one that is unyielding - authoritarian. God's truth becomes a straightjacket that binds and tightens rather than one that frees us to live and breathe.

2 – a spirit of exclusivism.

Without the elasticity that love provides – truth becomes hard and exclusive – it makes us believe that we are the only ones who are right.

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3 – a spirit of intellectualism.

I am deeply committed to the truth we find in the Scriptures – but without the power of the Spirit – I am well aware that it can become dry – sterile – intellectual. The antidote to this danger is not to dilute the truth nor to stop feeding the mind – rather it is to make sure that truth is embedded in the practical living experience of our lives – and put to work in the active womb of the church. A mindless faith is a disobedient faith – because we are called to love God with all of our minds as well as all of our hearts.

If or when – we find ourselves feeling this first love slipping through our fingers – if we find this dust of death silently falling upon us and starting to choke out the love of God – what do we do?

The diagnosis that Jesus gives – also gives the remedy. Although it has three steps – it is not simplistic. Each step will call for some deep inner self-examination.

REMEMBER – I appreciate some of you are married – and some are not – I want to be sensitive to that -- but if you would give me the liberty of using the analogy of marriage -- remember when you first fell in love – the excitement that you felt in every part of your entire being – you could not wait to see each other.

We hear today that 50% of the marriages end in divorce. What causes that? Most marriages/human relationships that deteriorate and collapse over time seldom do so because of some traumatic event such as an act of adultery. Erosion takes more time than an earthquake – but it is just as deadly.

For the great majority of marriages it is not an affair – rather it is a silent and steady decline into carelessness and monotony – they settle down into a comfortable pattern – in the smallest of ways we start taking one another for granted – the cards that we used to find and write when we first met and perhaps sent in the earlier years stop – we did not decide to stop – silent erosion ate away at the foundations of care – flowers stop coming – we just start to take people for granted – we just stop doing the small acts that express love – kind words seem to dry up. We never really decide to stop caring – somehow we just grew careless with one another.

Remember what it was like when you first fell in love with God – with Jesus - with his word – with His church. Remember how exciting that was. Remember when you first became a Christian – the thrill it as – the songs you sang at the top of

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your voice – Bible study was stimulating - remember how exciting the youth group or church was. You could not wait to get there.

The essential purpose of the work of spiritual remembering is not to go back to the good old days – rather it is to bring the vitality and passion we experienced those days forward into today. It is not an exercise in spiritual nostalgia – rather it is the joy of re-living.

Is there something that you need to remember with warmth and with joy – what it used to be like and what it would be like to have that back again? Was there a time when your faith in Christ and your love for him was warmer than it is now? You're not sure why but things have settled down to a low ebb.

In a moment – you can deeply remember all God has done for us in this piece of bread.

REPENT – We sometimes think that repentance is a word of emotion – we are supposed to cry and weep – it is not really a word of emotion – rather it is a word of decision – someone once said that it does not just mean we are sorry – but rather we are sorry enough to change.

We come to an honest confession of where things are really at -- It means to re-think – we stop going in the direction we are going in – and we turn around and set our feet in a new direction. It is to make a radical U-turn in life. We will stop the slide – we will put an end to the silent erosion – we will cease the deterioration – things can and will be different.

DO – TAKE ACTION - we make decisions and we take steps to change our habits – to get out of the rut we have settled into – we commit to do whatever we have to do to restore intimacy.

Where do we start – well, perhaps the best place to start is with a prayer.

This great prayer comes from Ephesians – and it invites as we pray to come and kneel before the Father – I will come down to this front row and kneel as I pray – let me invite you if you wish to move beyond your comfort zone and kneel where you are – I know we are not Anglicans – If kneeling is not for you – or that is physically uncomfortable or difficult for you – then please - that's OK – do what is comfortable for you.

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This is a prayer that invites us to come back to our first love. (Ephesians 3)  
14 *For this reason I kneel before the Father,*  
15 *from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*  
16 *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power*  
*through his Spirit in your inner being,*  
17 *so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you,*  
*being rooted and established in love,*  
18 *may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and*  
*high and deep is the love of Christ,*  
19 *and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to*  
*the measure of all the fullness of God.*

Response Hymn:

**WHEN I SURVEY THE WONDROUS CROSS.**

POST-COMMUNION Chorus:

**IN CHRIST ALONE**