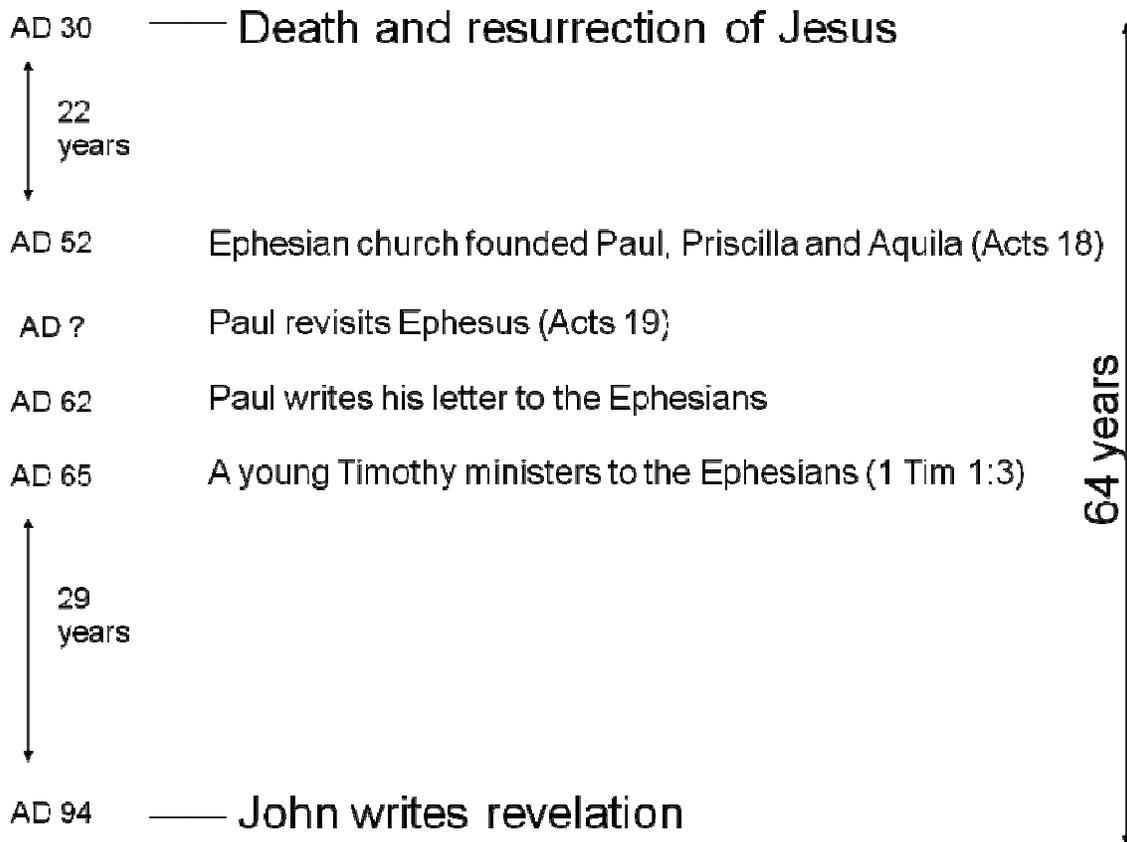


Sunday 3rd August 2008

Revelation 2:1-7. The Church at Ephesus.

This morning, we will be looking at Revelation Chapter 2:1-7 – the words - the letter - that Jesus speaks to the church which is at Ephesus. Now, there are 7 churches in Asia Minor and each one gets a letter. These seven letters contain various encouragements and warnings and should be read together as part of a family of letters. Of the seven churches, two get encouragement but no warning, three get encouragements and warnings and two get only warnings. The Ephesians are one of the churches that receive both encouragement and warning.

I thought it might be helpful for us to look at a time line – a brief history of this church to the date of the writing of Revelation. That will give us the historical context for this letter.



So, there is the historical context for this letter. Now I would like to give the letter an overall biblical context. This becomes important when we come to look at the central idea in this letter to the Ephesians – that the Ephesians have lost their first love. But what is the context for this verse?

Well, I am hopeful that some of you may be familiar with the movie Casablanca, because the plotline is instructive.

A very simple plotline sounds something like this. It's 1942 – in the dark days of World War 2. Victor Laslow is the leader of the Czechoslovakian resistance. He is married to Ilsa Lund. Because Victor is a wanted man all over Europe, they flee to Casablanca. They hope to buy passports to America there and so escape to freedom. There they meet up with Rick Blaine –who runs Rick's Café, the famous nightclub in Casablanca. Ilsa falls in love with Rick . Rick just happens to have two passports for America. Who will use them? Rick and Ilsa, or Victor and Ilsa. Rick tells Ilsa she must decide. Well, she can't. So here is the plot twist – Rick has to decide. He chooses to send Victor and Ilsa.

The film closes with Rick, and we are asked as moviegoers to imagine how Rick feels, having given up the love of his life. But I want us to think for a moment how Victor feels – his wife accompanies him to America– they are still legally married, but his wife's heart belongs to someone else. What kind of a marriage is that? Well, this is essentially the context for this letter to the Ephesians –it's the marriage context– Jesus as the groom, the Ephesian church as the bride who has lost her first love.

So with this context in mind, let's look more closely at the passage. I want to make three observations about this first love. You can have it – you can lose it and you can get it back. Since the passage centers on the idea of having lost a first love, I want to spend most of our time looking at that second one – losing it.

You can have it

Once, love for Jesus characterised this church. Paul prayed this for the Ephesian church in Ephesians Chapter 3:16-18

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

I think that it is fair to assume that this prayer of Paul was answered – for the Ephesian church fell not from just any height, but from a great height,

as we read in verse 5 of Revelation. They knew the depths of God's love, they knew the riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

Do you have that love? Do we as a church know something of that love. Does it come as something of a shock that we can lose it? If you have a close walk with God, if you feel his love every day, in good times and in bad, then praise God. Cherish it, nourish it, tell it out and live it out. Stay close to God's Word, listen for God's voice as you go through your day. Be eager to tell the good news about this love to others, Christian and non-Christian. Especially, be alert for any change in your heart attitude, go to God with it straight away. Because the principle here seems clear. Use it or lose it!!

You Can Lose it.

The Ephesians lost their first love, how did it happen? Well, the passage provides us with some insights. Jesus tells the Ephesians that there are some things that they have not lost – and it is here that we begin to get some understanding of how they lost their first love.

He tells them He knows :-

Their good deeds, hard work and perseverance (v2)

They can't tolerate wicked men (v2)

They test those who claim to be apostles but are not and find them false (v2)

They have persevered and endured hardships for my name (v5)

They have not grown weary (v5)

They hate the practices of the Nicolaitans – a group that thought it was O.K to worship God and also the gods of the culture around them as well (v6)

That's a pretty impressive report card, don't you think?

What's the problem then? And we need to get the problem into perspective – it's a big problem – so much so that if they don't do something about it, Jesus will remove their lamp stand from its place – Jesus will not permit them to keep going in the direction that they are going in – it's change or suffer drastic consequences.

Well, the big problem is this. They no longer have any love for Jesus – Jesus has their mind and their strength, but not their hearts. They were intellectually committed to the gospel, they did good works, they

withstood persecution, but long ago, their hearts had turned to dust and they didn't even realise it – Jesus had to tell them. They were just like Ilsa in Casablanca – yes, she was still wearing the wedding ring, yes, she went with her husband as they fled to America – but her heart for her husband was dust – she loved another. She was obedient to the institution of marriage, but she didn't love her husband. The Ephesians were obedient to the institution of religion, but they didn't love Jesus.

How do we get that way? Perhaps I can illustrate.

When I was growing up, I had a magic plate. I'd come to the breakfast table and it would be round and it would have cereal in it. Then it would go away and clean itself, turn into a flat plate and have eggs and bacon on it. I would go to school, by which time the magic plate had turned into a box with sandwiches in it. Later on at night, it would turn up on the dinner table with meat and three vegies on it. Boy, did I get a shock when I got married! The magic plate disappeared (along with my magic tall boy in my bedroom). I trust that you see what I am saying. I ate food, but I had no connection with food whatsoever. Did I love food? No, I loved eating – when it came to growing, or buying or preparing food – I hated it!!

You know, we fall in love with Jesus, we follow him and it is wonderful. Then, bit by bit, we loose connection with Him. We stop wanting to be with Him, and we don't admit that to ourselves. We don't want to find out why. It's going to be painful to investigate and fix what's really wrong. Instead we believe in the magic plate. If I do good deeds, go to church, work hard then it will be O.K. That's all I have to do and like magic, I will have a close walk with God. Let's see, this week I'll have the church service, I like the singing, some prayers and the first 10 minutes of the sermon, maybe a cup of tea and a quick chat. That should do it. We don't even stop to check where our hearts are at. We don't stop to think about what we are bringing to church, only what we want. Our hearts have turned to dust and we don't even know it. That's how we lose our first love.

Maybe you are here today and you are wondering if you have lost that first love? I can speak from personal experience here, as one who had to confront my own heart of dust some 5 years ago now. The give away is that if you have lost your first love, a bitterness of spirit is present. You don't want to do the things that you are doing and so you find yourself grumbling and complaining about the life that you are "forced" to live. I'm not saying that when you do have that first love there won't be

difficulties, I'm not saying that. But, if you have lost your first love, your heart attitude is one of grumbling, not of willing, even excited obedience.

You can get it back

So, if that was the whole story for the Ephesians, it would be a very sad ending. You've lost your first love, good-bye – no way back. But of course, it isn't. We have a loving and merciful and forgiving God, who wants us back. What a relief!! What did Jesus have to say to them. Let's look at verse 5.

“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”

Remember and Repent.

Jesus calls on the Ephesians to remember. Why? I asked myself. Well, I think it is that memory creates a strong desire. I remember how good it was to follow Jesus with my whole heart, no matter what life was throwing at me. I've lost that, I want it back. And here's the thing, without that desire, there is no motivation to change, and without motivation, we won't repent, because we don't really want to.

So, what do I want to say in conclusion?

If you are here today and you've never known that love, and you would like to find out some more, please come and see me after the service has finished – I would love to talk with you.

If you have lost that first love do whatever it takes to get it back. Remember and Repent. Jesus loves you and is ready and waiting.

If you have that first love. Guard it. And here is the one thing that would make me really happy – if some of you were to take this home with you - and here it is. Every morning when you wake up, ask yourself, “do I want to follow Jesus with my whole heart today?” If the answer is “Yes”, praise the Lord. If the answer is “No” or anything less than “yes”, then today is the day to sit down and figure out what has gone wrong. Today is the day to remember and repent – otherwise, whole years can slip by, with your heart as dry as dust and you won't even know it. Jesus will have to tell you.

Let's close with the words of Jesus in v7. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is the paradise of God.

Amen