

Ephesus and the Lamps

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, September 24, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 2:1-7; Zechariah 3:1-10; Zechariah 4:1-10; Haggai 1:1; 2 Chronicles 16:9; Isaiah 42:6-7; Mark 4:21-25; Matthew 5:14-16; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:00:10 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus tells the church at Ephesus they have abandoned the love they had at first, and threatens to remove their lampstand. Those two things belong together. Trace the lampstand back to Zechariah and it turns out to be a picture of God doing his own work through his people by his Spirit — which is why the way back is not to drum up a feeling but to remember, repent, and do.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Revelation borrows its imagery from the Old Testament. If you want to know what the lampstands mean, the answer is already in Zechariah, not in the newspaper.
- ◆ Zechariah saw a golden lampstand and was told what it meant: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit.” The light-bearing work of God’s people was never going to run on their own resources.
- ◆ Jesus commends Ephesus for something we rarely praise — they tested people who claimed apostolic authority, and refused the ones who were false. Caring which gospel gets preached matters enormously to him.
- ◆ The letter is famous as the “loveless church” letter, but Jesus never defines the remedy as an emotion. He says remember, repent, and do the works you did at first.
- ◆ Every time the Bible explains what love is, it describes self-sacrificial action. Patience, kindness, bearing, enduring — verbs, not moods.

- ◆ A version of Christianity where Jesus is satisfied only when you feel emotionally hot would be a nightmare for the sick, the grieving, and the wired-differently. That is not what he is asking for.
- ◆ The letter does not end on the threat. It ends with a promise to the one who conquers — the tree of life, in the paradise of God.
- ◆ The foundation is not our love for him but his for us. He does not send thoughts and prayers from a distance — he is the one who walks among the lampstands.

► 1:00:10

Matt opened the letter to Ephesus — the first of the seven letters Jesus has John write down in Revelation — and then immediately postponed it. Before reading the letter, he wanted to know where its furniture came from. A theme has been running through these chapters: lanterns, lamps, menorahs. “I think today’s the day we should go back and look at what’s up with the lamps.” The place to look was the Old Testament.

Why we start with two discouraged men in a ruined city

► 1:01:51

The backstory is short. Judah is carried off to Babylon, eventually allowed to come home, and comes home to a temple in ruins, a small population, and no money. A prophet named Zechariah is sent to tell them to stay faithful and rebuild — not everyone wanted them to, and the people themselves were more interested in their own farms and houses. Haggai, preaching at the same time, names the two men who have to lead it: Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest. One holds the civil authority, the other the religious. Both need encouraging.

1. Joshua, and a change of clothes

► 1:04:12

Zechariah dreams, and sees the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord with Satan at his right hand to accuse him. It is an intense scene, and Joshua does not speak in it. What happens is done to him.

“Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ And to him he said, ‘Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.’”

ZECHARIAH 3:3–4 ↗

Filthy garments and clean ones are a theme readers of Revelation will recognize. And Matt pressed on who is being clothed. A high priest represents the people to God and God to the people; here he and his friends are explicitly called “men who are a sign.” The forgiveness is not a private favor to Joshua. It is God’s posture toward a whole people — and it is tied to two strange images:

a servant called the branch, and a single stone with seven eyes, after which “I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.” For the branch, he pointed to Isaiah 11 and left it there. One day of forgiveness for a whole land, a branch, a rock. Something is being promised that no rebuilt temple could deliver.

2. The lampstand, and whose power builds a temple

► 1:08:22

The next vision is the one that matters for Revelation. Zechariah sees a solid gold lampstand with seven lamps, and two olive trees beside it, and admits to the angel that he has no idea what he is looking at. Matt admitted the same — he would rather have the picture than the description. But the explanation is given, and it is not an explanation of the hardware:

“This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.”

ZECHARIAH 4:6 ↗

That is a pointed word for a governor. Zerubbabel has a police force, resources, authority — every reason to think the project stands or falls on his competence. God tells him the mountain in front of him becomes a plain, and the capstone goes up “amid shouts of Grace, grace to it.” Then the seven lamps Zechariah has been staring at are named:

“These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth.”

► 1:11:48

What eyes ranging over the earth are for is spelled out elsewhere:

“For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.”

2 CHRONICLES 16:9 ↗

So the lamp is not a warning light. It is support. Stay faithful, be a light in a dark place, and God’s presence will be with you — because this was always his work and his Spirit.

3. The one who walks among them

► 1:13:27

Now the letter. [Revelation 1:20](#) has already told us the lampstands are the churches, and with Zechariah in hand that lands differently. Jesus is the light of the world, and he turns to his disciples and says they are too — and the ministry expected of them will be accomplished by God’s Spirit, not their might. That is as true of a church as it was of a governor.

It also matters that Jesus is described as walking among the lampstands. In each of these letters he introduces himself with the detail that fits what he is about to say — to Smyrna, [the one who died and came to life](#), who then asks for faithfulness unto death. Here, the one who is already among them. He knows their thoughts, their troubles, their successes.

► 1:14:56

“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

REVELATION 2:2–4 ↗

Matt slowed down on the commendation. Toil is not activity; it is costly service. Patient endurance is not what you have when nothing is going wrong. And the testing is genuinely impressive — Paul had warned these very people that [wolves would come in among them](#), and they held. A discouraged church short on numbers, offered a partnership with a charismatic, credentialed newcomer, is exactly the church that takes the deal anyway. Ephesus cared more about the gospel they had received than about the help. “I would love for Jesus to be able to say this to us.”

4. A lamp is a witness

► 1:19:39

Before touching the love question, Matt wanted the lamp traced forward. In Isaiah 42 God gives his servant “as a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon.” Light in this vocabulary means liberation — someone in the dark gets out. And when Revelation introduces the two witnesses, doing exactly that to the kingdoms of darkness, it calls them the two olive trees. Which is where we last saw olive trees: standing beside Zechariah’s lamp, attached to the sentence about the Spirit.

► 1:22:27

Jesus talks this way too. Do you bring out a lamp to put it under a basket? Obviously not. And in the same breath: “from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” Matt noted the echo and let it sit. Was that a threat to take away a lamp?

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

MATTHEW 5:14–16 ↗

► 1:23:43

Then he stopped and voiced the objection himself: “You might feel like I’m shoving the lamp stuff into this letter that’s really all about that love and feeling.” His answer is that the imagery is load-bearing. The lampstand says God is the light of the world and is accomplishing that through his people by his Spirit; the light is God’s own ministry among people, seeking and saving. The letter opens with Jesus among the lampstands and closes with the threat of removing one. That is not decoration around a message about feelings. It is the message — which is why the remedy he actually gives is remember, repent, and do the works you did at first. Read it carefully, Matt said, and you notice “he doesn’t say drum up an emotional feeling again.”

5. Finishing the letter: the Nicolaitans, and the tree of life

► 1:25:40

“I want to continue, so we’ll finish the letter and we’ll come back to the love stuff.” The last two verses do two things at once.

“Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

REVELATION 2:6-7 ↗

Who the Nicolaitans were is not spelled out, and Matt did not pretend otherwise — are they the same crowd as the false apostles? “I don’t know.” But the parallel movements in the neighboring letters are explained, so we do not have to be too curious: to Pergamum he names the teaching of Balaam and to Thyatira Jezebel — both ancient names used as labels for a movement, and both times Jesus says what the movement teaches: food sacrificed to idols, and sexual immorality. Same old stuff under a new name, and the Ephesians knew exactly what he meant. The part Matt found striking was the commendation itself: “there are occasions where Jesus would really like it if we hate certain things, because he does too.”

And then the letter does not end on the threat. It ends with an invitation to whoever has ears — to the one who conquers, the tree of life in the paradise of God. The lampstand can be removed; the tree is what is being held out.

6. What Jesus is not saying about love

► 1:27:22

“Okay, back to the love thing.” Matt started by conceding something nobody in the room would argue with: the world around us does not consistently hold a pure and godly view of love. “If you want to contend with me on that, that’s fine, just talk to me later.” Dysfunctional versions are as common as McDonald’s, and our culture mostly uses the word for the positive way we feel inside. Is the warm fuzzies the core of what Jesus is asking for here? Maybe it is related. Maybe it is not.

► 1:28:02

The text itself does not prescribe an emotion. It prescribes three verbs: remember, repent, do. And when scripture does explain love, it goes the same direction:

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7 ↗

He walked it a phrase at a time, and every phrase came out as a verb. Patience is not sitting still because everything is easy — “patience is actually when you’re eagerly waiting for something you don’t have, or when things are difficult and you’re engaging actively in long-suffering.” Not envying or boasting counts especially when you are tempted to. “This is active behavior that’s engaged in choices.” When the Bible outlines love it does not camp out on a positive feeling unconnected to behavior — which makes it make more sense that Jesus says remember, repent and do, or I will remove your lampstand.

► 1:29:55

And that lands the whole Zechariah detour. “All of that was really good parallels to Zerubbabel,” Matt said — this light-to-the-nations project is God’s own project and he will accomplish it. “It is not on our backs to toil hard enough to make the church project work.” So the point of the verbs is not that we out-work the problem. We should not camp out on whether we worked hard enough; that was never the main thing.

► 1:30:29

Here he flagged a bunny trail, and it is worth the detour. It mattered enormously that Ephesus cared which gospel they were preaching — that they siphoned the truth off from the falsehood and kept the true. Some people find it baffling that doctrine would matter to a God of grace. It is a kind of color blindness, Matt said, and there is a matching one on the other side: the person who signed up because Christianity is true and correct and we do the right things, and cannot see why love would be the thing Jesus brings up. He cares about it enough to threaten a lampstand over it.

► 1:31:35

Back to verse four, and Matt noticed what is missing. “He doesn’t even say love to him, or love for him, or love for the outside world, or love for the brothers.” The object is left open; it is genuinely a little ambiguous. What is not ambiguous is the instruction that follows — remember, repent, do. So there are a couple of ways forward. Maybe returning to your first love really is centered on affection and positive feeling; that is possible. Or maybe love is the loyalty and faithfulness and endurance themselves, with the warm feelings along for the ride. “I’m not even sure how important those differences are,” he said, “because it’s obvious from what I’m seeing that Jesus does care about the remember, the repent, and the do.”

► 1:33:02

Then he named the move he distrusts, including in his own preaching. Jesus says they have abandoned their first love; the preacher supplies an obvious definition of first love and builds from there as though Jesus had said it. “I would hate for the warm fuzzies version of this letter to be the back door that false versions of love sneak into my understanding of Jesus.” He said it twice, in two ways, to make sure it landed: you can hold back the floodgates of what the world says love is everywhere else, and then

accidentally let it in right here. “I don’t want to take just what the world says love is, and then put a Jesus sticker on it, and then just keep it.”

Infatuation is real — “I love your socks, I love the way you make toast.” The mature version is forty years later, in sickness and in health. Matt did not rule out that affection is part of what Jesus means. His point was narrower and harder to dodge: whatever it is, if it is real, according to Jesus it will look like remember, repent, and do.

► 1:34:50

And he pushed on why it matters practically. Imagine the alternative actually enforced: you endure faithfully through hardship, but unless you are emotionally hot at all times, Jesus is ready to reject you. What about the morning you wake up sick, or the week after someone you love dies? What about someone autistic? “Are you not a Christian that day until you get over it?” Would you have to live under judgment for having had a regular day thinking about regular things? That is a nightmarish scenario, with Jesus “constantly hovering,” and it is not the letter.

7. The love at the center of it is his

► 1:35:26

An action-oriented definition of love raises the bar, and Matt granted that immediately: “there’s a greater expectation from me if what it means to love Christ actually involves the way I live.” It would land as a heavier demand — except that one of our worst diseases is running everything through a lens of ourselves. Jesus never said he would be unhappy until we loved him back in the same measure. “He didn’t say, look, I’m going to come to your church and just wreck you unless you pay me back in love the same amount I’ve given to you.” The foundation everyone here is standing on is his love, and the same logic applies to it: if love is action, then his love is action. His works are complete and never lacking.

► 1:38:00

Which is the relief. It is “not just a thoughts and prayers hashtag that he sends from really far away.” He is near — the one who walks among the lampstands. Matt listed the evidence, starting with what he called the minor things, which is why we love the gifts of the Spirit: prophetic encouragement, the dead raised, sight given to the blind, the sick healed, the brokenhearted encouraged, people visited in dreams who do not yet know him — Muslims all over the Middle East. And then the major one: he showed his love by self-sacrificially dying and giving us his life, and that was not half-hearted, not a flare of emotional zeal. It was real and true commitment.

“*We only love because he first loved us.*”

► 1:39:44

So the wrong way to read this letter is to use it as an occasion to beat yourself up for insufficient zeal and then resolve to manufacture more. That source runs dry immediately. “If we want to grow in love, we should stop thinking about our own love and ourselves generally, and start thinking about the wonder and the awe of his love for us” — the love that came first, that is complete, that did not cut corners. “He gets off his throne. He comes near. He comes near you when you’re depressed or brokenhearted. He is God with us.” It is absolutely crucial that we read this letter and ask what the Spirit is saying — and there are broken ways to do that which will not be productive at all. So Matt ended by doing it the other way, out loud: Holy Spirit, come; what are you saying to Hope Chapel in this letter; help us walk in your love abundantly.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Haggai 1:1](#)
- [Zechariah 3:1–2](#)
- [Zechariah 3:3–4](#)
- [Zechariah 3:8–9](#)
- [Isaiah 11](#)
- [Zechariah 4:2–3](#)
- [Zechariah 4:6](#)
- [Zechariah 4:10](#)
- [2 Chronicles 16:9](#)
- [Revelation 1:20](#)
- [Revelation 2:8–10](#)
- [Revelation 2:2–4](#)
- [Acts 20:29–30](#)
- [Isaiah 42:6–7](#)
- [Revelation 11:3–4](#)
- [Mark 4:21–25](#)
- [Matthew 5:14–16](#)
- [Revelation 2:5](#)
- [Revelation 2:6–7](#)
- [Revelation 2:6](#)
- [Revelation 2:14](#)
- [Revelation 2:20](#)
- [1 Corinthians 13:4–7](#)
- [1 John 4:19](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Zerubbabel was told the work would not run on his might or his power. Where are you currently carrying something as though it depended on your own resources?
2. Jesus commends Ephesus for testing people who claimed authority and finding them false. What makes that hard for a church to do, and what would it cost us?
3. Matt described the maneuver of assuming what “first love” means and preaching from the assumption. What have you assumed it meant, and where did that assumption come from?
4. If love in scripture is patient, kind, bearing and enduring, which of those verbs is currently thinnest in how you treat Christ and his people?
5. He said we grow in love by looking at his love, not at ours. What would it change about this week to spend your attention there instead?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY6MxYpCbyE&t=3610s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.