

REMEMBERING FIRST LOVE

Revelation 2:1–7

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Revelation 2:1–7 (NIV)

“To the angel at the church in Ephesus write: these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know you cannot tolerate wicked men, that have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 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. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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.”

This letter to the church at Ephesus is the first of seven letters, which the Lord speaks in Revelation 2 and 3.

I. Just as an introductory word about these seven letters, there are two mistakes that I think are commonly made in reading this part of Revelation.

A. One mistake is to read these letters prophetically, to say that each of the letters represents a different epoch of the church age. To say the letter to the Ephesians represents the apostolic church. The letter to the church at Smyrna represents the age of the martyrs in the second and third centuries. The letter to Pergamum represents the age of Constantine, which was a period of compromise. The letter to Thyatira, the fourth letter of chapter, represents the church in the

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Middle Ages. The letter to Sardis in chapter 3 represents the Reformation, the church which was almost dead but sprung to life again. The letter to the church at Philadelphia represents the great missionary age. And finally the end of the age, the last church, is the Laodicean church which is barely alive and neither hot nor cold and the Lord says "I'll spew you out of My mouth."

These have been popular interpretations of these letters. But there are several reasons they don't fit.

One is because if you really applied the details that are in each of the letters to the particular ages they are supposed to describe you'll find that the details don't quite match. I won't give you an exegesis on that this morning.

B. The second reason that's not a valid way of looking those passages is that John has specifically said in 1:18 that he was to be shown the things which are and the things which are to come. From reading these two chapters, it is clear they are describing living real churches at the time. These represent actual congregations not prophetic congregations and if you were to take a sampling of the church world today you would see all these kinds of churches represented.

You'd even find them represented in this community in which we live. There are some Laodicean churches. There are some Smyrna churches. There are some churches like Pergamum, which allowed false doctrine to penetrate it. There are churches like the Ephesian church. I know it used to be very positive to say Laodicea was the end time church. But now that there's been such a renewal of the Holy Spirit the people had to recalculate that and say there seems to be two movements at the end of the age. The wickedness shall increase but the Spirit of God shall be poured out upon all flesh. We want to be careful that we don't overly systematize these two chapters into some prophetic scheme.

C. Second is to go the opposite end of the pendulum and say these were simply historical letters

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written to churches that once existed but now don't. The way I think you read these letters is to recognize that they may speak to real churches but they also speak to us. The Scripture always speaks to us. We can go anywhere in the Scripture and find it speaks to us. I believe that with all my heart. I wouldn't preach Sunday after Sunday if I didn't believe that this Word conveys authority and power and meaning and application for us. So as we look at this letter to Ephesus, and as we look at the other letters we'll do this interweaving. What did the Spirit say to that church but through that letter what is He saying to us right now?

D. The letters themselves are very highly stylized. As you read them you can find that each letter describes a characteristic of Christ. Each letter, with the exception of two, carries a commendation. Each letter, with the exception of two, carries a criticism. Each letter has a correction to the church and each letter has a word of challenge. We use that as we look at Ephesus.

II. I'm especially involved with this Ephesian letter because I've been to Ephesus.

It's now deserted of activity but one of the most beautiful cities archeologically. At least if you compare it to Corinth, there's no comparison between what remains of Ephesus and what remains of Corinth. It was one of the great cities of Paul's day, and in the day of the writing of Revelation, it was a most populated city in what was then called the Roman province of Asia in far western Turkey. It was a highly advanced city. It was a city which sported one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In ancient days, you'd have come from the west into Ephesus. Practically all the trade coming from the east going to Rome came through Ephesus because it was a major sea town on the western side of the province of Asia. If you'd been coming in from the west you would've landed at the dock which is now eight miles from the sea because of the silt of the river. But there's the marble road 5 feet wide. The main street is all marble. The

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marble is still there. As you look up the street, there's this vast amphitheater that dominates the whole town. There's nothing like the amphitheater at Ephesus from which you can see the whole harbor and city laid out below you. The amphitheater, which seated 25,000 people, appears in a riot in Acts 19 when it was filled with tradesmen who were angered at the invasion of Christianity into the town which could cost the idol makers their trade. For two hours all they could do was shout at the top of their lungs "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." It resounded through the town. Anybody in the town could have looked up and seen these 25,000 people madly cheering, like at a soccer game, but only saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." The disciples restrained Paul who wanted to go and preach to the unruly mob.

It was the greatest city in Asia and it was the greatest church in Asia.

Now some decades after Paul has been to the church, some three decades in fact at least after the church is founded, this letter comes. This is a church, by the way, that had great pastors. It was founded by Paul and pastored by Timothy. We find the letter to the Ephesians was written to them. The letter of 1 Timothy was written to Timothy while he was pastor at Ephesus. And John the apostle appears to have been a pastor at Ephesus.

III. Now the Lord wants to speak to this church.

A. He addresses the church in describing His character 2:1 "To the angel at the church in Ephesus." Last week we said that that word "angel" probably either indicates the pastor of the church, the messenger of God to the church, or the personified spirit of the then-present church. That personified spirit is what the Lord is addressing. The Lord takes a phrase to describe himself out of this vision which is revealed to John in verses 12–20. In fact, as the greeting to the churches unfolds, the Lord takes out of this description in chapter 1 particular phrases from His personality that fit the needs of every particular church. So the Lord identifies Himself. "The

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words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand.” One phase of the character of Christ is described in terms of the fact that He has the church in His grip. In chapter one He is described as holding the seven stars. It’s a weaker word in the Greek. He has a hold. But this word that is used here is used to describe when a person really gets hold of something and his grasp is so strong that the entirety of what he has is in his hand. One remembered the word of the Lord, how He says of His people, nothing shall pluck them out of my hand. And He is addressing the church that is tempted by the religion, by the materialism of its day, by the empire cult, by the persecution—all of these forces including false teachers are attempting to loosen the grip of the Lord on His church and John first of all sees Jesus addressing this church and saying, I’ve got you in my grip.

The second facet of the character of the Lord that is revealed here is that He walks among the lampstands. Here He is present in the church. It’s sort of a double image going on here. On the one hand, the Lord has the church present with Him in eternity. I see us as secure in Him spiritually. So the first image sees us present in Him.

But the second image sees Him as present among us. If He’s walking among the church I think He’s doing so here as sort of a commander in chief, reviewing the troops, reviewing His people as they line up before Him. His eyes, which have penetrating fire, are seeing what they command and what they can correct in each of the churches.

The image of the pastors or the angels or personified spirits as being stars in His hand someone has said represents the fact that the church in the hand of Jesus is like a many jeweled necklace which He holds. Through the imagery of the stars and the golden lampstand, the Lord is telling us in regard to His character that we are precious to Him. We can be sure that He’s present among us.

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B. Then there comes a word of commendation to the church. Characteristic of these letters is this word of commendation. It's interesting to watch how New Testament letters were written. Paul's letters were similar to this. Before a word of correction is spoken, a word of commendation is given if a commendation can be given. What a good way to attack a problem or look at a fault in someone else. And before we say to them, "Correct your fault," we take a moment to look at what areas of strength they have and give praise so that our words of correction can be better received. The Lord looks at this church and He says to it as He says to us, "I know," and He says that to every church. The phrase begins as He speaks: "I know."

Is there anything about our life that the Lord doesn't know? That's what John is saying. His walking among the lampstands, His presence among His people is a sure indication that He knows. He knows all the good and He knows all the bad. He knows the struggles and He knows the successes.

What does the Lord know about this church that He commends? He sees this body as a toiling church. Verse two says, "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance." Works just describe the Christian life in general, their conduct for Christ. And their toil indicates the effort which they were engaged in, to really do the work of the Lord and be Christians. Here was a church, which not only stood under grace, but here was a church that was actively involved in meeting one another's needs. A church, which actively was involved with ministry to the world. Here was a church where people didn't sit around and wait for someone else to do the ministry, a church that can be described as toiling. And in the midst of that toil, enduring. The Lord sees this as a beautiful quality to commend.

That raises the question as we look at our Christian life: If the Lord were to come among us and say, "I know," would this be a quality that He could commend in us, a quality that looks at our

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life and our responsibility to the body of Christ?

C. The church is not only a toiling church but the Lord also indicates, by way of approval, that it is a testing church. “You cannot bear evil men but have tested those who have called themselves apostles but are not and found them to be false.” (Revelation 2:2). It’s very easy to see why Ephesus would have a problem with false teachers. Just the geographical location would make that possible. With so many roads coming into the place and with a harbor where the east and the west met, it’s sort of like Los Angeles. You can look at the Saturday church page and see every kind of thing has wandered into Los Angeles. You certainly wouldn’t find the same church page in Paducah, Kentucky.

But Ephesus was sort of like southern California. There was a continual convergence of false teachers coming in. Paul when he had left this church years before in Acts 20 had taken leaders aside and had warned them with tears that wolves would come in dressed in sheep’s clothing and attempt to lead them astray. Now this church in thirty-five years since Paul has said those words has been true and has stood the test. The Lord says, in verse 6 in commenting on this church that has tested false teachers, “Yet this you have. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans which I also hate.” That appears to be one of the groups that we find later and we’ll deal with it in the letter to Pergamum. The Nicolaitans were one of the groups that brought into the church the idea of grace so radical that it didn’t matter what one’s morals were. One could just do anything and be anything and not worry about duty and morality. Here was a church that had tested that branch of false apostles.

Here was a church that would not have been debating from within its ranks the question as to whether or not we can ordain persons who live in adultery. Or whether or not we can ordain homosexuals into the ministry. At Ephesus that question would have been discussed by the

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heretics outside the church but would have never been brought up inside the church. Because that church had tested false prophets.

Some of the false apostles had brought in doctrines of legalism. Some of the false prophets and false apostles like the Nicolaitans had brought in a false morality. But this church Jesus says has been a testing church and it bears His approval.

D. But this church has also been a tireless church. Verse 3 states, “I know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for My namesake and have not grown weary.” And indeed it was a time when the church could grow weary. I think there are three groups of people probably in any given church and I’m certain these were present at Ephesus. There are those who never toil for Christ so they are never tired. And they are not addressed by this letter. The Lord has said to us in regard to our command and response to Him, “Love the Lord your God with all your might,” (Mark 12:30). So toil is involved.

Spurgeon made the comment, Some Christians spend their lifetime in such a way so that it would not exhaust a butterfly to live for Christ the way they have lived. Some are never tired because they never toil.

I find, however, there are many Christians who toil and become tired and drop out. These I would call the retired believers. They say at one point I was hurt in a church, or by other Christians and that hurt in my life makes me never want to become involved deeply again. I’ll show up to a meeting among believers but don’t ask me to become involved. That says, “I’ve been involved for the Lord faithfully for many years but now it’s time for someone else to take a hand at things and I’m just going to sit on the sidelines and watch.” Or perhaps persons who after really serving the Lord become more interested in loving the world rather than loving the things of Christ. These persons are not addressed here either because the Ephesian church has not by

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character worked hard and then rested. It has gone on to work. So they fit into this third category—those who toil and do not tire. You have not become weary, you have not fainted in responsibilities to the Lord. What an incredible commendation.

Do you ever get tired? It seems like half the time I run around feeling tired. This Scripture spoke to me this week! This whole attitude of I'm tired all the time, you need to look at your own life in this. Here's a church that worked for the Lord and they didn't get tired. So what's that say? It was a real penetrating Word for me. Words that are beautiful commendation to church. If I were to be the visiting inspector, visiting the Ephesian church and find it to be a church that is toiling and is testing and is tireless I would say, "Give that church a triple A rating and put it in the most Recommended Church category. There's nothing wrong with it."

Yet the Lord, walking among His churches sees things that maybe the average observer would not pick up. And the Lord since He is the lover of the church spots something in the church that He wants to correct. Verse 4 has this correction: "I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love." Scriptures tell us about the first love of this Ephesian church, a church that one day saw the power of the Holy Spirit working in its midst. Many of the believers that had come to Christ had been wrapped up in the occult. When they saw the delivering power of Jesus Christ at work they brought all their occult items, their magic paraphernalia which was absolutely in abundance at Ephesus. It was a demon-filled town. They brought that abundance of material and they burned it. Fifty thousand pieces of silver worth. If a piece of silver is worth a day's wage in our culture and a day's wage is calculated maybe fifty dollars, that's about a two-and-a-quarter-million-dollar bonfire. So great was their love for the Lord that they didn't even think twice about giving up those things which they had kept from their past.

When Paul is teaching in the town he taught five or six hours a day. Many of these believers

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were involved in Bible study. And from Ephesus the word of God spread to all of Asia, which means that the persons who were converted in a short time were carrying the message of the gospel on the roads to the other towns around. It was a church that was wildly effusive in its expression of first love. Now the Lord coming to the church says you have left your first love. You've abandoned it.

A bride toils unconscious of her work because her work is for her bridegroom. She parts from him with an embrace in the morning. She goes about to do her work of the day in caring for the house and the meals and other duties. She meets him with an embrace again in the evening. All her labor is a mere circumstance because it is done in devotion to her husband. The days and weeks and months pass. She becomes occupied with the details of life. She may be preparing good meals because she has more experience. She's doing things more sophisticatedly around the house and life. But she has changed her habit of embracing her husband as he leaves in the morning, calling out from somewhere within the recesses of the house "Good bye" rather than leaving him at the door. And failing to embrace him at night.

I think that's a perfect description maybe of what the apostle here is saying reflecting the words of the Lord "the loss of first love." That initial glow is gone. Here's a church now that is doing things out of duty. I wonder if for Ephesus the reason they lost their first love is that they were busy standing for the orthodoxy. They were busy contending for truth. They were slapping down the false apostles which rose in their midst. Sometimes when people become ones who stand for purity of doctrine, it's so easy to slide off the edge and become then unloving in spirit. Some of the people who are the most unloving people in the whole Christian faith are those who cry the most eloquently for defending the fundamentals of the faith. In crying out for the fundamentals, every person who disagrees becomes a heretic and anathema. And the love is gone. You can

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sense it. There is no substitute for love. Even orthodoxy doctrinally is not a substitute for love.

The Lord looks at this church and says that all the orthodoxy in the world cannot take the place of love. It's lost the initial glow.

Jesus says of this church, you've left your first love. He doesn't say you've lost your first love.

He says you've left it. If love were a matter of feeling, something that happens to you and you don't have any responsibility for, then you could lose it. But love is not located in the feelings, contrary to romantic notions in the western world. It's not in the feelings. The Scriptures identify love as being in the will. It can be gained or it can be left. He says of this church, you left or you abandoned.

Some people say they fall out of love. Does the magic all of a sudden go away? Does he feel it go? No. At some point, they will it. They may not realize it, but they will it. And because the failure is in the will it is correctable. If it was in the feelings, and we had to wait for mysterious magic to come back, it couldn't be corrected. But it's in the will. You've left your first love.

The Lord is saying to the church and to us, "I've never left my first love of you. You may have left it, but I haven't. That's why it hurts me so deeply, because I still love you the way I did when I first called you." It describes God's relationship to Israel. How He loved His bride. Sometimes Christians may be tempted to wonder if God loves them as much as He did when they first became believers.

God has never left His first love. God is love.

The Lord then gives a correction to this church to get it back on track, to get it back to its first love. The first thing he tells them to do is to remember. Go back to that time when your love was at first. Recall it, recollect it. The first love, adoration of Christ, which comes as a result of realizing what He's done for us. And who He is. Remember.

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Then comes this word, once you remember, then repent. Repent means far more than to be sorry.

It means change. As you remember, change. Change back to what you were. Stop your way of doing now and go back to what you were doing before. That brings in the third word, repeat.

That's the consequence of repentance. To go back over and do the things we did at first. It's an interesting thing going on here in the Greek. There were three imperatives that are being used.

The imperative to remember. The imperative to repent. And the imperative to do again. The imperative to remember is in the present tense. Remember and go on remembering. Don't ever lose that memory of first coming to Christ and that love. But the word "repent" is not in the present tense as though it were meant to be an ongoing action. It's in a tense, a past tense, which denotes moment in time—something happened and it came to pass.

We have no comparison in the English because all of our imperatives are in the present tense.

Suppose you have young children playing around you and they're getting too rambunctious and you finally give the order: "Stop that!" You mean stop right now. But they may believe by that there will be a second or third call coming down the road. Wouldn't it be nice if in the English we had a tense that would tell children, right now. One decisive action.

That's kind of what comes out as the Lord speaks to this church: "Stop this. Repent of this." He's saying in one decisive action bring your will again to the Lord and recommit yourself.

Otherwise, the Lord says to this church, "if you don't repent, I'll remove your lampstand"

(Revelation 2:5). He's not talking about salvation. He's talking to the church, not to individuals.

Sometimes people get the Scripture mixed up with salvation. Remove your lampstand? What is the lampstand? It's the place of influence the church has in the world, shining in a dark world.

Jesus says I'll remove it.

Visiting Ephesus is a reminder of how true the Lord's words were. He'll remove the lampstand

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when the love grows cold. No one to my knowledge even sleeps in Ephesus these days. The town has been relocated and renamed. A little village of about twenty-thousand Turkish people is five miles away from Ephesus. The lampstand was taken out. You take the love of the Lord away from a church and its witness is going to die. Why is it that you find so few churches who, generation after generation, maintain a strong witness? It seems like in an area, this church emerges and it's a light in the area, then it fades away. Then another comes up and then it fades away. What is it? It is the Lord acting out His judgments on His church. He says, "I will come to you," not His second coming but "I will come to you and remove the lampstand." When that church in the eyes of the Lord fails to meet His requirements then He removes the lampstand. I think He removes the lampstand simply by taking His presence out. It's an awful threat to the church.

E. Following that threat, there is a challenge. His challenge is for the church to hear. "You who have ears let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Seven times in the gospels Jesus uses this phrase, "He who has ears let him hear." Eight times in Revelation it's used indicating that through the constant repetition the importance there is a hearing which is audible but there is a hearing of the heart. A quickening to the consciousness and to the mind. Hear! In verse 7 the Scripture is saying, "To him who overcomes [or conquers] I will grant to eat of the tree of life." Here He's not speaking to the church but to individuals, "to the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Here the Lord puts before us the image of when he created man and woman and put them in the paradise, the garden. In this paradise He put two trees: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. He told man, "You cannot eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil." He never told man not to eat of the tree of life. But human nature is such that the human race chose to eat of the tree of the knowledge of

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good and evil and taste sin rather than life. Now, in the paradise of God, the opportunity is restored to eat of the tree of life.

“To the one who overcomes”—this overcoming doesn’t have anything to do with hard work or effort because we know that salvation is of grace. Revelation 12 tells us how we conquer. We conquer by the blood of the lamb and by the word of our testimony. The conquering has already been done by Jesus Christ on the cross. Somehow we look at the cross and go away saying, “We won! We’ve conquered!” We didn’t have a thing to do with it. The Lord did it. But on the other hand we are here to cheer. I think that’s our responsibility as Christians in conquering. We’re here to cheer and to say, “He won! And we give praise and honor to Him. You won’t deny us that testimony. We’ll conquer by the blood of the lamb and the word of our testimony! We’ve decided which team we’re on. We already know who has won and we’ve conquered by His blood and our testimony.”

This glorious letter to the church, glorious letter to us. How does it strike you? How would the Lord commend you? How would the Lord correct you? Is first love a problem? Scriptures say when we come to the communion table we’re to examine ourselves that we may eat. I think the real emphasis is “that we may eat.” The examination is not an order to hinder us from eating but to examine ourselves that we may partake. All are invited to partake who have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.