

“Forsaking Our First Love” – Revelation Part 3  
Revelation 2:1-7 (Letter to Ephesus)

This morning, there is actually an issue more vitally urgent than national elections, international recessions, or even global pandemics. There is a threat to the church and to our souls which is more insidious and malignant than anything you’ll find in the news. We will discuss this morning the single most crucial issue in all of Christian faith and life. And my prayer is that we will respond wisely.

We are continuing our series on the book of Revelation. Today, we begin looking at the letters to the 7 churches, the first of which is to Ephesus. What do we know about this city? Ephesus was located on the southwestern coast of what the ancients called Asia Minor, what we call Turkey today. Her very name means “desirable,” as the city was often called Lumen Asia, the “light of Asia.”

This was a city of great *political* importance. The Roman governor over the region lived here and tried all the important cases in the city. Ephesus was host of the Pan-i-o-nian Games, as prestigious as the Olympics in their day. Imagine standing on the floor of their Colosseum, the marble track rutted from Roman chariots. Imagine being in the stands, a place where Paul sat and preached. To the eye, this was a magnificent city.

Ephesus was also the most *religious* city on her continent. Three temples stood in tribute to her worship of the Emperor. Artemis (Diana), goddess of fertility, was worshiped across the region. Her temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World – with 127 columns, each 60 feet high; many of which were covered with gold and jewels.

But what about the *church* in Ephesus? The congregation was probably founded by Aquila and Priscilla. They were later joined by Paul, who preached here more than two years. Timothy pastored the church, as did Apollos. And John the Beloved Disciple pastored this church, and is buried in the city. Tradition says that he brought Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the city with him. After Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, the center of Christianity shifted to this church and city.

So, what can we learn from this church? Jesus’ words to them reveal a great deal to us. Jesus first commends their church family in wonderful ways:

He applauds their actions (v. 2): “*I know your deeds and hard work.*” He commends their “perseverance” – a word that means to endure w/ steadfast courage despite all opposition. He affirms their integrity of faith: “*I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false*” (v. 2b). Then later in v. 6, Jesus commends them specifically for rejecting the practices of the Nicolaitans, an early cult known for its self-indulgent behavior. [Pause]

But the Ephesian Christians have a problem. A spiritual malignancy is growing in their hearts. Left unchecked, it will destroy them. Jesus laments to them in v. 4 – “*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.*”

“At first” here means “first in time.” They have forsaken the One they loved first when they became Christians – the Lord Jesus. This church has gotten so busy with the work of the Lord that they have forgotten how to walk with the Lord. They are consumed with “doing” and have lost “being” – focusing on the work at the expense of the worship.

Jesus’ lament turns into a warning in v. 5: “*Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not return, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.*” As we discussed last week, the “lampstand” refers to each church and the mission with which they have been entrusted – bearing forth Jesus, the Light of the world. So, if they choose not to return to their First Love fully, all so that they can reflect his Light faithfully, Jesus is blunt – he will remove their church. [P]

This letter is in God’s word because it applied not just to them, but to us as well. If we forsake our “First Love,” the same thing will happen to us – individually, and as a church.

How does forsaking our First Love happen? [Pause] When ...

Religion replaces relationship. The Ephesians were busy beyond words. Their deeds, hard work and perseverance were all consuming. And the relationship they once had with Jesus now becomes a religion for him.

That happens in marriages all the time. You were so close at first, when you had no one but each other. Then children came along, and jobs, and houses and cars and bills and responsibilities, and your marriage became a business partnership.

The same thing happens with our souls and Jesus. When he was our “first love,” we had no one but Him. He was the center – not the activities, schedules and programs. But then over time, our devotion to him (displayed through our living for him) shifts. Our service loses its center – and our relationship with the Bridegroom ends up looking more and more like that business partnership. We get so busy with the *work of the Lord* that we lose touch with the *Lord of the work*. [Pause] Religion replaces relationship, then ...

Complacency replaces passion. The Ephesians had their act together. They were the leading church in the leading city in their part of the world. All must be well. Dangerous thinking. Our marriage must be healthy since there’s no fighting. Our kids are doing well, our finances are in order, we have enough status to be successful. We can stop investing in our relationships simply by making the assumption that they are strong and will remain so. The passion we had at first is replaced by a complacency at all we have achieved.

So it is with our souls. We’re here at church, passing all our neighbors who aren’t. We’re living good lives, doing good things. We must be right with God. He must be pleased with us. But that kind of thinking is how complacency replaces passion.

And one day, we wake up to realize that we’ve lost our love for Jesus. We work for him, but it’s not driven by our devotion of him. We worship him with our lips, but not with our hearts. We read and pray and give and serve, but it’s all part of our routine – commitments we’ve made, bills to pay, obligations to keep. We come because it’s Sunday, not because He’s our First Love.

When that happens, we’re not a church anymore. We’re a religious organization, a salesmanship club with a Bible study. We do good charitable work for the community and provide fellowship for our members, but we don’t adore Jesus. Jesus, the perfect Son of God, entered this world filled with darkness and despair, to suffer and conquer death itself to redeem for himself a bride, made new and devoted to him. The Church is the bride of Christ. We are not living as the church unless He is our First Love. Jesus’ warning to Ephesus is his warning to us – “*I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place*” (v. 5) The sobering truth: *When our love disappears, our light disappears as well.*

That's what happened in Ephesus. The church died, and the city with her. The Temple of Diana, 127 pillars covered with precious metals and stones, is just one pillar today, with a bird's nest on top. There is no Ephesus, and no Ephesian church this morning. What happened to them can happen to any church, anywhere. Even here. Even us. [P]

Does any of this describe you? [P] If it doesn't, if you're *not* living as Ephesus today, be grateful to God, and rejoice in him. Renew your passion, your unconditional commitment to your First Love today. And be encouraged by his word. [P]

But if it does, if you're in Ephesus this morning, know that it's not too late. This letter of Christ comes to us today with the same opportunity given to Ephesus. *What do we do?*

Jesus cries out: "Remember how far you have fallen" (v. 5a). This is a call to humbly acknowledge our state. Remember when you were in love with your Lord – when you prayed because you wanted to *be* with him; when you read his word because you wanted to *hear* from him; when you worshiped because you wanted to *honor* him; when you gave and served and witnessed because you wanted to *give back* to him. If you don't remember a time you were in love with Jesus, today can be that day.

Jesus then declares, "Repent" (v. 5b). Change. Turn from where you are and profess anew the love you once had. Decide that you want him to be your First Love again.

And Return. Jesus adds, "*Do the things you did at first.*" Don't wait until you feel love for Jesus – act out love for Jesus. If he were your first love today, what would you do? What person would you forgive, or seek forgiveness from? What wrong would you make right? What resource would you give? What ambition would you surrender? What lost person would you pray for and seek to win to Jesus? What service would you render? Do that. Do it now. Do it while you have the opportunity.

Any of us can be in Ephesus today. I know, because I've been there as well.

When I first trusted in Jesus as a child, it was as though a new world had opened before my eyes. God's word was an exciting mystery to me, and being with my church family, learning more about the astonishing love of Jesus, was the greatest joy. All of it was exciting, none of it routine.

But over time that changed. I became a professional. I had an office where I studied. I preached sermons and led Bible studies. But slowly and subtly, work was replacing worship. Times when I preached because it was my responsibility, not because God had given me a gift I couldn't wait to give to his people. Times when I ministered to others because it was my place, rather than my privilege. I wish I could say that this was only one time in the past and I overcame it – over and done with. But the truth is, as a sinner still awaiting glory, I continue to struggle in keeping centered on Christ, my First Love.

But thank God, by his grace, there have also been those times of *remembering, repenting and returning*. Such as during college while serving in a ministry called New Life; or being awed by the Creator while serving with A Christian Ministry in the National Parks; or seeing the joy of Christ in the face of a child in Colombia; or being humbled by the hospitality of Christ embodied by sisters and brothers in Kenya; or being overwhelmed by the faithfulness & servanthood of members of our Riverlawn family again and again!

All of these were times when Jesus spoke to my heart and called me back to himself. Times when the Spirit of God moved in powerful ways – where pain was met w/ comfort, lack with supply, fear with peace, despair with hope, hate with love, death with life. [P]

But all this points to something still to come. And we encounter it in our very last verse, where Jesus says to us: “*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*” (v. 7)

This call to overcome – to be victorious – is found in all seven letters. Jesus reiterates the purpose of his words to his churches: As the One who overcame sin, the world, and death itself, He calls out to us that we can do the same ... in Him. By *returning to our Love*, we will be able to *reflect his Light*. AND, as those who belong and abide in him, we will share in His victory! [P] Where will this be? In that place of restored, perfect, unending fellowship, where we will partake of life in the presence of Christ forever!

So if you are *lingering* in Ephesus rather than *longing* for eternity – I urge you to hear what the Spirit says to the church – what Jesus speaks to you and me ... Remember, repent, and return to your First Love. [Prayer of invitation].