

Reviving your First Love

Often we talk about **revival** in the context of God's quickening presence among His people - touching their hearts and deepening His work of grace in their lives in a unique and extraordinary way. This view of **revival** is recognised as an extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results in the realm of human existence. I'm sure we would like to experience this. However, there is another and far more important **revival** that prepares the way for such a unique and profound move of God. And it is found in **Revelation 2:1-7**....

"To the angel of 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 that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you 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 the love you had at first. Consider how far 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 favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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."

Note, the first of the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor is to the church in the city of **Ephesus**. Ephesus was the greatest city of the Roman province of Asia. Ephesus was an important commercial and export centre for Asia with three major trade routes converging at the city harbour. Ephesus was a free city, granted by Rome the right of self-government. It boasted a major stadium capable of seating some 25,000 persons, a market place, and a theatre. Going from the harbour to the heart of the city was a magnificent avenue 35 feet wide and lined with columns. It also boasted one of the wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of the pagan god Artemis or Diana.

The Christian message first came to Ephesus through the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila, around the year A.D. 52, when the Apostle Paul left them there en route from Corinth to Antioch. On his next missionary journey Paul remained in Ephesus more than two years and started the church (Acts 19:8-10), and some time later Timothy ministered there too (1 Timothy 1:3). It is the Apostle John, however, who is most closely associated with this city and her church.

And it is for that reason, at the command of Jesus, that John writes the first of the seven letters to the church at Ephesus.

We need to always keep in mind that fact that these are the words of Jesus - proceeding directly from His mouth. So notice how the letter begins: **"To the angel of 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."** This image is explained to us in chapter 1 verse 20: **"The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."**

The description of Christ here is very informative and extremely important: Christ **"holds"** the angels – i.e., they are in His control – and Christ **"walks"** among the churches – i.e., He is present in their midst. Implying that the Lord is concerned for their wellbeing and genuinely cares for them. It is clear that Christ walks among His churches (as they congregate) because He **loves** the church as His bride (Ephesians 5:32). This acts speaks clearly of intimacy. Christ **walks** among us because He desires to be close to us! This is why He promises, **"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them"** (Matthew 18:20).

Notice what Jesus calls His church? Jesus says the church is a **lampstand**. This is true not only for Ephesus but also for the other six churches of Asia Minor; and it is true for us and for every single church or congregation of believers. The church is a **lampstand**. That's what we are. We are lampstands! Remember, we are neither the light nor the lamp itself. Christ alone is the light – the lamp. And we are lampstands. That says so much about our purpose, our task, and our calling. A lampstand, of course, is a place upon which a lamp is set so it can give light to everyone in the room. It is our job, then, to allow Christ to shine and display His glorious light to everyone we come into contact with. We are vessels designed for this very purpose!

In this letter to the church of Ephesus, Christ says He has seen much to praise. First, He praises their lifestyle. As the One Who **walks** in the midst of the churches Christ is able to say, **"I know your deeds"**

(verse 2). These deeds are described by the following words: *"your hard work and your perseverance."* The Lord praises the Ephesian Christians for their hard work. They boldly proclaimed the Good News even if it meant suffering or death. The Lord also commends the church of Ephesus for its perseverance.

Perseverance means they never gave up. They had to endure malicious slander from the unbelieving Jews and persecution from the craftsmen who made miniature copies of the god Artemis. Yet, they never quit on their faith or their hope in Christ.

The Lord further praises the Ephesian church because it does not tolerate wicked men – described in our passage as "false apostles." This church does not allow herself to be led astray by erroneous teaching. It tested those who called themselves apostles and found them to be false. The Ephesian church had an eye and an ear for sound doctrine. It is a discerning church. But that's not all the praise Christ gives to this church. Our Lord also says in verse 6, ***"But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."*** The Nicolaitans were a heretical Christian sect who compromised with the pagan society in which they lived. They ate at pagan feasts the meat sacrificed to idol gods and embraced sexual immorality.

And the Ephesian church is praised for hating these practices. It placed a strong emphasis on a holy, pure, and clean life. Notice also, when praising the Ephesian church for its kingdom work, its right doctrine, and its holy life, the Lord can say, ***"You ...have not grown weary."*** After a while it is so easy to stop trying and fighting and working as hard as you can for the Lord and His kingdom. It is only natural to let up, to ease back a little. But not the Ephesian church.

I am sure that as the Lord **walks** among us here at Cornerstone He can say about us what He says about the church at Ephesus.

Like the Ephesian church we work hard for the gospel and the kingdom. We can point to our many programs and departments and the many willing volunteers participating in them. We can point to our generous contributions to other ministries. In fact, this church has a reputation throughout the area for its emphasis on sound and right doctrine; we in are known for preaching the uncompromised Word of God. Like the Ephesian church we quickly discern false teaching. Furthermore, like the Ephesian church we do not tolerate those who persist in wickedness, they are quickly placed under the discipline of the church leadership. We too insist on holy, pure, and clean lives. And I think it can be said of us what was said of Ephesus: *"They have not grown weary."* Cornerstone, I commend you, and I urge you to continue in all of this.

Now on to the criticism

The Christ Who **walks** among the golden lampstands, the Christ Who knows the works done by His church can look into hearts and see what is really there. This Christ looks at the church of Ephesus and says, ***"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."***

"First love." Do you remember your first love? Do you remember how you felt? Your heart turned to jelly every time she or he glanced at you. You would have given anything for an embrace. You were crazily in love and would have done anything to get close to her or him.

The Ephesian church had a "first love." When they were first formed they were known for that love. The Apostle Paul could write to them, ***"I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love ..."*** They were known for their love for God, their love for each other, their love for their fellow man. They were crazily in love, and for this love they were willing to do anything. But now, some 25 years later. Jesus says, with pain and sorrow in His heart, ***"You have forsaken your first love."***

What a devastating accusation! The Ephesian church has and shows little or no love. Jesus says they have "forsaken" their first love. That word "forsaken" implies a very deliberate action on their part. Purposely – not accidentally - they have neglected (set aside); they have let go of; their **first love**.

What happened? How come this sad state of affairs has come about? As already mentioned, one of the strong points of the Ephesian church was her emphasis on sound doctrine, correct teaching, and lack of tolerance for wickedness. However, in their zeal, the Ephesian church's involvement in the works of faith became more important than **love**. Good works without love is totally meaningless and ineffective! Love, is the mark of a true Christian and the true church.

Remember what the church really is? The church is a **lampstand**.

Its place and task is to show forth the light which is Christ. A church without love fails completely to shine the light of Christ into a dark and corrupt world. In fact, without **love** a church cannot fulfil this God-given assignment – it is simply not possible.

Jesus appeals to the Ephesian church to return to her first love: **“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”** The church's first love is pictured as a "height." Like any new lover, the church was 'flying high'; it was scaling the mountaintops. But it has fallen from the "heights" of its first love. And, it has fallen quickly. "Repent," says the Lord. That word "repent" comes up twice in our passage. It means to turn around, to change direction, to turn over a new leaf.

Then comes a warning, a terrible frightening warning: **“If you do not repent,”** if you do not turn around, if you do not change direction, if you do not return to your "first love," says Jesus, **“I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”** To remove the lampstand in modern terminology is to liquidate the church. If the church of Ephesus does not return to the way of **love**, it will be liquidated. Without love a church is spiritually bankrupt! Tell me, where is the church of Ephesus today? It has disappeared. It has been shut down by God. Which leads us to suppose they did not listen to this warning from the Lord.

We cannot look at the church of Ephesus without taking a close look at ourselves. We need to ask, "has our love also grown cold?" Does Christ have reason to criticize us too? Does He Who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands have reason to tell you (personally) to also repent and to return to your **first love**?

Let me tell you something. When a church first starts everyone is full of enthusiasm. There seems to be so much love, unity, fellowship, and peace in the body. But after time it seems to be a different story. Much of the enthusiasm is gone. And, there is not near the love, unity, fellowship, and peace that there was before. I have seen this a number of times in different churches.

When this congregation is 25 years old – the same age as the church of Ephesus – will we find suddenly that we have forsaken our first love too?

Let me ask you some personal questions that only you can answer, because I cannot look into your heart.

Most of you before me are very faithful in church attendance. Why do you come so faithfully – because you love the Lord, or out of habit? The Cornerstone congregation gives so generously to the needy. Why do you give so generously – because you are filled with love for the needy, or for some other reason? This congregation supports other ministries very strongly.

Why do you do this – because you love the kingdom, or because it is the thing to do? Do we speak about and to each other in love? Do you help in your department in love for Christ, or is it just a job? All of us who are involved in church life, do we really serve in love? **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** This wasn't directed only at the church at Ephesus, it is for all those who are prepared to hear what the Spirit is saying. What has the Spirit said?

That the Lord praises us when we work hard for the gospel and kingdom, when we are doctrinally sound, when we live holy lives. But the Spirit also tells us that the Lord wants us to be filled with love – love for Him, love for each other, love for our fellow man.

Note, it always starts with loving Him! You may think you have loved before coming to Christ, but that was not true love. Only true love (agape) can equip you to love others the way God intends. Likewise, if you cannot get close to Him you cannot get close to your husband or wife, your children, your brothers or sisters, your loved ones or your friends. If you have trouble finding intimacy with Christ you will have trouble finding intimacy elsewhere. It all hinges on your relationship with Him! When was the last truly intimate moment you shared with the Lord? I really believe that the key to revival is for the church to revive its **love for Christ** - its **FIRST LOVE**. The bride needs to revive her first and only love!