



THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS

First Love

Revelation 2:1-7

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My first love was a girl named Kathy. We met when I was four days old. Our mothers were friends, so when my mom brought me home from the hospital, Kathy, who is a year older than me, and her mother came over to see the new baby in town. She says it was love at first sight.

We grew up in the same town, went to the same church, and here is a picture of us in kindergarten together. We were getting on a train for a field trip.

It took me a few years to notice, but I will never forget the day I did. I was in 8th grade. I was sitting on a brick wall during lunch at our school, and she walked by. Her long brown hair was flowing in the wind, and she was wearing a purple smock top and white bell bottoms. And she looked at me ... and smiled. From that moment on, I was in love!

Our first date was to the athletic banquet. I didn't even have my driver's license yet, so my brother had to drive us. I was shy and didn't say a word. But Kathy and my brother had a good time talking. And when I walked her to the door, I didn't know what to do. So, she being the older woman, took the initiative and kissed me. We became high school sweethearts, and here is a picture from prom. We dated for 10 years; through high school, college, and seminary. And finally, she asked me to marry her. And she is still my first love.

This morning, we are launching a series called *First Love*. It's about Jesus being the "first love" of our lives. It's about Jesus having "first place in everything" (Colossians 1:18).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus dictated seven letters to the Apostle John and instructed him to send the letters to seven specific churches. In these letters, Jesus encouraged each church and He confronted each church. As we study these seven churches, we must ask ourselves ... *Could Jesus be saying this to us, as a church? Could Jesus be saying this to me?*

In these letters, His words are strong and direct. Because, Jesus said, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline" (Revelation 3:19).

What was true in that day is true in our day. We have a tendency to drift. If we're not careful, we become complacent, we compromise, and we grow cold. But that's not how followers of Jesus are supposed to live. There should be a passion and zeal about us, because we have been touched by the love and sacrifice of Jesus.

The theme graphic is a guy looking at an iPad. Everything in the world is at his fingertips. All the good and the bad. And the graphic shows the world reflecting from the iPad back on the guy. It represents our struggle. It represents everything that distracts us, tempts, and competes with Jesus. And that's what we're going to talk about for a few weeks. What are we allowing to distract us, to tempt us, and to compete with Jesus?

To one of the churches in Revelation, to Ephesus, Jesus said, "*You have left your first love*" (Revelation 2:4). Could He be saying that to us? If we're not careful, we become complacent

and we just don't love Him as much as we used to. And when it happens, Jesus speaks up, and His words are strong and direct. "Wake up! ... Remember who you are! ... Repent, and come back to Me!" I believe Jesus is speaking to us. Because He loves us. And if there is any drift or complacency in our lives, He is going to confront it. I believe He calling us to lives of passion and zeal, which is the only appropriate, grateful, humble response to the love and sacrifice and grace of Jesus. So, let us make sure that Jesus is our "first love."

The final book in the Bible is the book of Revelation. It begins with this phrase – "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:1). The word "revelation" means to reveal or to unveil. The Greek word is apocalypse, which we think of as the catastrophic end of the world. But the apocalypse is a revelation of the future when Jesus returns. But before He returns, He has a message for His church.

The book of Revelation was written by the Apostle John, who is also the author of one gospel and three other New Testament letters. John had been exiled to the island of Patmos, off the coast of modern-day Turkey. He was in his 90s. It had been 60 years since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven.

The emperor Domitian was in power. Domitian was the fiercest of the Roman emperors. And he demanded that citizens address him as "our Lord and God Domitian."¹ When the early Christians refused to call Domitian "Lord" ... "they were sentenced to die by the thousands. Some were thrown to the lions in the great coliseum; some were burned at the stake. Others were wrapped in the skins of wild animals and fed to dogs or dipped in tar and lit as torches for the emperor's garden. Still others were crucified, including mothers with the babies draped around their necks."² It was in such a terrifying time that Jesus gave the book of Revelation to John. It was written to comfort, to encourage, and to inspire hope, not only for these first century believers, but for believers in every generation.

And here's what happened. John writes, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet" (Revelation 1:10, NAS). It was the voice of Jesus. John knew that voice. He had been with Jesus for three years, while Jesus walked on the earth. John knew that voice very well.

And Jesus said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty ... Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea" (Revelation 1:8, 11, NAS).

Then John writes this. "I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Therefore write ...'" (Revelation 1:12-20, NAS).³

John would write down everything he heard and everything he saw, and because he did, we have the future in our hands. This is what will happen leading to the return of Jesus Christ. But in chapters 2-3, Jesus dictated seven letters to John and instructed him to send the letters to seven specific churches in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey.

- Ephesus – a church that had lost their first love
- Smyrna – a church Jesus praised for enduring persecution
- Pergamum – a church that had compromised theologically
- Thyatira – a church infiltrated by the culture, whose leaders refused to confront idolatry and immorality in the church
- Sardis – a church Jesus called “dead,” they had gone to sleep and were merely going through the motions of religion
- Philadelphia – a heroic church, which Jesus praised and urged to press on
- Laodicea – a complacent church Jesus called “lukewarm” and rebuked them for it

Each letter was written with a similar pattern. Each letter was addressed to the “angel” of the church. Does this mean every church has a guardian angel? We can’t be sure of that. This Greek word can mean angel, but it is also commonly translated as “messenger.”⁴ So, this “angel” most likely refers to the “messenger” of the church, the elder or pastor of the church. Beyond that, here’s the general pattern for each letter.

- a description of Jesus, intended to stir respect within the church – “the One who ...”
- a compliment, intended to encourage the church – “I know your deeds”⁵
- a criticism, intended to confront the church – “I have this against you”⁶
- a challenge, intended to correct the church – “remember ... repent ... wake up”⁷
- a promise, intended to motivate the church – “to him who overcomes”⁸
- an appeal, intended to hold the church accountable – “he who has ears, let him hear”⁹

In these letters, Jesus encouraged each church and He confronted each church. As we study these letters, we must ask ourselves ... ***Could Jesus be saying this to us, as a church? Could Jesus be saying this to me?***

THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS

Revelation 2:1-7 is the first letter. “To the angel of the church at Ephesus write ...” Ephesus was an important city; politically, academically, and economically. Ephesus was the home of the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was the size of a football field, with columns all the way around. It took 120 years to build the temple. The famous Library of Celsus was also in Ephesus, with over 12,000 ancient scrolls. The largest open-air theater in the world was in Ephesus, with a seating capacity for 25,000 people. The Apostle Paul founded the church in Ephesus. Timothy became the pastor. And later, the John was a leader there. Acts 19 records a riot breaking out in Ephesus, because Christian influence was so pervasive that it harmed

the economy. When people became Christians, they quit buying idols and it put silversmiths out of business.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says ...” (Revelation 2:1-2, NAS). The seven stars refer to the seven leaders. The seven lampstands refer to the seven churches. This is a comforting reminder that Jesus “holds” us and “walks among” us.

Jesus began with a compliment to encourage the church. “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary” (Revelation 2:2-3, NAS).

Jesus complimented their deeds, their toil, and their perseverance. The people in this church served well, worked hard, and endured difficult times. They exposed false teachers and did not compromise theologically. They were not ashamed to bear the name of Jesus in public and they had “not grown weary.” Sounds like a great church.

But, Jesus also confronted the church. “But I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Revelation 2:4, NAS).¹⁰ Thirty years earlier, this church turned Ephesus upside down, but a generation later, they had left their first love. What is Jesus saying? They were doing all the right things and working hard, but they just did not love Him like they used to.

Could Jesus be saying this to us, to our church? Could Jesus be saying this to you or me?

It can happen to any of us. We have a tendency to drift. If we’re not careful, we can become complacent, compromise, and grow cold in our love for God.¹¹ And when it happens, Jesus speaks up. In one of these seven letters, He said, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline” (Revelation 3:19). He loves us too much to let us drift away. Like a mother screaming at a toddler wandering into a busy street, Jesus is screaming to us and warning us about spiritual complacency.

What did Jesus mean when by “first love”? When I think of “first love,” I think of affection, priority, and Jesus having first place. I think of commitment to Jesus, devotion to Jesus, and trust in Jesus. I think “first love” means that He pleasantly dominates our thoughts and that He is the primary influence in our lives. “First love” means He shapes our convictions, our character, and our conduct.

So, what does it mean to love Jesus?

- To love Jesus is to be drawn to Him, to be attracted to Him.
- To love Jesus is to cherish Him, to value Him, to count Him dear and precious.
- To love Jesus is to long to be with Him, to long to talk to Him.
- To love Jesus is to be in relationship with Him, a relationship that is a two-way street. It’s a mutual affection, a mutual love. It’s loving Him and being loved by Him.
- To love Jesus is to respect Him and revere Him.

- To love Jesus is make Him the exclusive priority of your life. He said, “If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison – your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26, NLT).
- To love Jesus is to put Him first.
- To love Jesus is not to love the world. The more we love Him the less we will be attracted to the world, lured by the world, and tempted to sin.
- To love Jesus is to proudly say He is my Savior and He is my Lord.

So, when Jesus says, “You have left your first love,” could He be saying that to us, as a church? Could He be saying that to you or me?

What does it look like?

- It’s when you allow others things to take His place, allow other things to occupy our minds and hearts, allow other things to be more attractive.
- It’s when you no longer have a hunger and thirst for God.
- It’s when the excitement is gone, when the intimacy is gone.
- It’s when you don’t feel like meeting with God as often. When you don’t pray like you used to. When you’re less interested in reading the Bible and hearing the words of God.
- It’s when church becomes a “have to” instead of a “want to,” and church attendance becomes less frequent.
- It’s when your conversations are more about the weather, sports, and movies, and less about God and what He is doing in your life.
- It’s when life becomes more and more about your plans and your ambitions.
- It’s when your schedule is packed, when you’re constantly on the run and constantly seeking fun.
- It’s when you lose a sensitivity to the conviction of the Holy Spirit when you sin, when you don’t feel bad about it anymore.
- It’s when you’ve lost a sense of awe and reverence, when worship is singing songs instead of praising God.
- It’s when you don’t love Him as much as you used to.

How does it happen? I think our affluence has something to do with it. We don’t need God as much when we can afford to buy anything we want or fix any problem we have. We’re comfortable. I also think distraction has a lot to do with it. Like the theme graphic with the guy looking at his iPad. The whole world is at our fingertips; distracting us, tempting us, and competing with Jesus. Other people drift from God when bad things happen. They blame God. They feel like He let them down. So their trust in Him and their love for Him grows cold. Or, a loss of love for Jesus may be the result of foolish choices. When we choose to sin, we choose to walk away from Him. Or, it may be a slow, unnoticeable drift. We never intended it to happen, but we wake up one morning and just don’t love Him like we used to.

Could Jesus be saying this to us, as a church? Could Jesus be saying this to you or me?

If He is, if we have drifted, if we have become complacent, if we have left our first love, ***how can we get it back?***

Jesus told us how. “Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first” (Revelation 2:5, NAS). Remember and repent. Remember what? “Remember from where you have fallen.” It’s an unfortunate reality, but as time goes on, if we’re not careful, our spiritual vitality can fade. We don’t realize it when it’s happening. But we wake up one day and wonder where God has gone and wonder why our faith is stale. And it happens because ***the day the cross begins to fade is the day spiritual vitality begins to fade.***

In one of Paul’s letters to Timothy, tucked in the middle of fatherly exhortations, it’s as if Paul’s cadence slowed down. It’s as if he paused, stared out his jailhouse window, and then with a different tone said, “Oh Timothy, whatever you do, remember Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:8). Compared to all the other instructions, this one jumps off the page. “Oh Timothy, whatever you do, remember Jesus Christ.”

Remember that Jesus once looked down at this earth from heaven, and that He created this place! Remember His miracles, remember His compassion, remember His teaching. Remember His agony in the garden as He volunteered for the cross, because He cared more about saving us than saving Himself. Remember His blood, His pain, His cross. Remember His resurrection, His victory and ours!

What’s the cure for complacency? Remember. As Anne Graham Lotz suggests, go back to the cross “and take a good, long look.”¹² ***Because the day the cross begins to fade is the day our spiritual vitality begins to fade.***

Jesus said, “Remember ... and repent.” Jesus is like a mother screaming at a toddler wandering into a busy street. Repent before you get hurt. Repent before you go too far. Repent before you regret it. And what is repentance? It’s turning around. Stop going in the direction you’re going and turn around. Apathy, complacency, and compromise are all the result of drifting away from Him. So Jesus urges us to “repent,” to turn around and come back to Him. The Bible talks about “godly sorrow,” which is a deep regret for offending the heart of God and a deep regret for drifting from God.¹³ When David confessed his sin in Psalm 38, he said, “I am so sorry for what I have done” (Psalm 38:18, NLT).

What’s the cure for spiritual complacency? “Remember.” Remember the cross. Remember the love and sacrifice of Jesus. Remember how much He loves you. And “repent.” Turn around and come back to Him before you regret it.

Then Jesus said, “Or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent” (Revelation 2:5, NAS). Jesus was warning the church that He would remove His presence from the church if they did not repent. A church that does not love Jesus does not have the presence of Jesus; therefore, does not have the power or blessing of Jesus.

Then Jesus made it personal. He moved from warning the entire church, to making an appeal to the individual. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” If

you have ears, then listen. This is personal. This applies to me and to you. And, “To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7, NAS).

CONCLUSION

Jesus complimented the church of Ephesus, but He also confronted the church. “I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” His words are strong and direct. And we can’t escape the obvious question. Could Jesus be saying that to us, as a church? Have we, as a church, left our first love? Are we going through the motions? Is there just a lot of religious activity going on around here? And we can’t escape the personal question. Could Jesus be saying that to me?

You know if you’ve drifted. You know if you’re in a season of complacency. You know if your thoughts, your worship, and your passion for Jesus is not what it used to be. So what do you do? Remember. Remember how much He loves you. Remember what He did on the cross for you. And repent. Turn around and come back to Him before you regret it.

Three times, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me? ... Do you love Me? ... Do you love Me?” And He’s asking us. So, do we really love Jesus?

NOTES

¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of Jesus*, Volume 1, The Daily Bible Study Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), page 19.

² Anne Graham Lotz, *The Vision of His Glory: Finding Hope through the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996, 1997), page 20.

³ What does this description of Jesus mean?

- The seven lampstands represent the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. And if Jesus sits in the center of these churches, then He should be at the center of our churches.
- His robe, reaching to the floor, represents His role as priest. Again, Jesus has given us access to God. He is the bridge to heaven.
- His golden sash represents His royalty. He is the “King of kings” (Revelation 19:16).
- His white hair does not mean that Jesus is old, rather represents His eternal wisdom. Daniel called Him the “Ancient of Days” (Daniel 7:9). He knows everything!
- His eyes of fire suggest purity and righteousness. Imagine being eye-to-eye with Jesus.
- His feet of bronze remind us of the bronze altar, where sacrifice for sin was made. His feet of bronze may suggest that He sits in judgment over the entire world.
- His voice will roll powerfully like the ocean waves. John could look in every direction from the island of Patmos and see the ocean. He woke in the morning and went to sleep at night to the sound of the Aegean Sea. Oh, how it must have reminded him of God’s power. So, he used the ocean to describe the powerful voice of Jesus.
- His mouth as a “sharp two-edged sword.” I’m not sure I would want to come face to face to Jesus with a sword dangling out of His mouth. Surely, John was referring to the authority and truthfulness of Jesus.
- His face will shine like the sun. The writer of Hebrews described Jesus as the “radiance of His glory” (Hebrews 1:3). One day, all of us who believe will see the radiant, beaming face of Jesus.

⁴ The Greek word is ἄγγελος.

⁵ As in Revelation 2:2, 2:9, 2:13, 2:19, 3:1, 3:8, 3:15.

⁶ As in Revelation 2:4, 2:14, 2:20, 3:1, 3:15-16.

⁷ As in Revelation 2:5, 2:16, 2:25, 3:2, 3:11.

⁸ As in Revelation 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21.

⁹ As in Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22.

¹⁰ Sounds similar to 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

¹¹ Old Testament warns us about becoming “stagnant in faith” (Zephaniah 1:12). The New Testament warns us about becoming “sluggish” in our faith (Hebrews 6:12). One time the Lord said, “You have not called on Me, O Jacob; you have become weary of Me, O Israel” (Isaiah 43:22). Israel had become bored with God!

¹² Lotz, page 53.

¹³ “Godly sorrow” is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 7:11. Richard Foster comments on this regret in his book *The Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978, 1988, page 152).