

FIRST LOVE REV. 2:1-7

This morning, we are going to begin a series looking at the 7 churches that were the recipients of John's letter called the Revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. To help us get a better grasp on each of these churches, we are going to introduce each message in this series with a brief 3-5 minute video clip. These videos will take us to the historical sites and give to us some important background information that will help us to better understand the text. The narrator in these videos is the British actor, David Nunn. This morning, we are going to take a brief trip to the ancient city of Ephesus.

Show Video of Ephesus

Ephesus was certainly one of the most important cities in the first century. It had great **commercial** importance located at the mouth of the Cayster River, controlling the trade of the Cayster Valley. It had great **political** importance being the capital of the Roman province. Ephesus was called the "Supreme Metropolis of Asia". It was known as a "Free City" which simply meant that Rome had recognized its significance to the point where she was granted the right of self-government within the limits set by the Roman Emperor. It had its own democratically elected body called the boule', and an assembly of citizens called the ekklesia. Ephesus also was an important town **culturally** for it was the home for the Pan-Ionian Games. Everyone knows the love of the Greeks and Romans for athletic contests, and these games held in the month of May ranked right along with the Olympic Games in importance in the Empire. Ephesus was an important city **religiously** for it was the home of the Temple of Diana. The Greeks had a proverb- "The sun sees nothing finer in his course than Diana's Temple". And there was a measure of truth in that saying for this temple was recognized as one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world as our Video brought out. Certainly, Ephesus was a city where one could look upon the pageant and panorama of Greco-Roman life at its most impressive and brilliant nature.

Yet, as John wrote a message to this city, his concern was not for all of its worldly importance, but rather his concern was for a group of called out believers who comprised the church at Ephesus. God is not impressed with the external glories that humans construct. He loves the people whom he has created, and he longs to build relationships with them. And he especially cares for the body of Christ, his church, the ones bought with his blood.

The outline of John's message to the Ephesian Church is so clearly given by him that we will not attempt to restructure it at all. In fact, in each of these letters, it is easiest just to follow John's own outline. First of all, there are some words of **commendation**. Then there is a **complaint**. And finally, there is a brief **conclusion** in

which a reward is stated. Notice them as we read together, and we will begin in chapter 1 for it gives us some background to understand the 7 stars and lamp stands.

READ Rev. 1:9-2:7

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lamp stands, and among the lamp stands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lamp stands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.

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 lamp stands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, 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 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 lamp stand 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.'"

1. John recognized 3 areas of commendation in the church at Ephesus.

a. There is a commendation in the area of **Christian service**. "I know your deeds, your hard work". The Greek term that is used here means "diligent labor, or work to the point of exhaustion." It was not just mere work that John is referring to here, but exhausting labor, continuous effort perhaps even bordering on burn-out.

The Ephesian church was evidently an active church, busy in service for the Lord. Its members were willing and diligent workers, so much so that their toil was well-known. This is commendable, John says.

b. The second area of commendation was their **endurance**. "I know your deeds, your hard work and your endurance." And again in 2:3, "You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." The Christians at Ephesus had been exposed to some fierce local opposition. As we have already seen in the video, the great temple of Diana was here. From the beginning, when Paul first preached the gospel, there had been persecution first of all from the craftsmen, then from the majority of the populace. These people had endured physical persecution for their faith. They had undoubtedly also suffered thru social ostracism and ridicule. Yet they had persevered and they were still standing for the truth of God. John had learned some real lessons concerning patience and endurance and he appreciated that trait in these believers. Certainly, it is commendable when believers stand firm in their faith for the Lord in the midst of opposition.

c. The third area of commendation was their **orthodoxy**. "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false." And later in verse 2:6, "But you have this in your favor: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." In Acts 20, Paul when giving his final good-byes to the elders at the church of Ephesus warned them that ravenous wolves were going to come in to try to devour their flock. And these wolves had come- false teachers trying to pervert the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can't be dogmatic as to the identity of these Nicolaitans whom John identifies here. Early traditions identify the Nicolaitans as followers of Nicolas from Antioch. Nicolas was one of the early leaders in the church, so much so that he was chosen as one of those first 7 deacons in Acts 6. But unhappily according to this tradition, Nicolas apostatized from the faith, and began to lead Christians away in error. Others feel that the term Nicolaitans here is symbolic for the Greek word is made up on 2 terms meaning "destroyer of the people". These feel the Nicolaitans would be used in a generic way of any teachers who would try to harm the people of God. There are also those who identify the Nicolaitans here with the "teachings of Balaam" over in verses 14 and 15 under the message to the church in Pergamum. It is interesting that Balaam in the Hebrew is made up of 2 terms that mean exactly the same thing as Nicolaitans in the Greek. And the 2 sins mentioned later- eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality- would have been great temptations to these Christians in Ephesus. The temple of Diana was a temple of sex worship. But whatever the exact reference which the original readers would have clearly understood, and which is not critical for us to know today, the point that John is making is that this church stood victoriously against the temptation of those who would try to water down God's truth. And

this was commendable. So John says that their work, and their endurance and their orthodoxy are very commendable.

2. However, John continues, "I hold this against you". He has a complaint. The complaint is simple. In all of their service for the Lord, they had left their first love. In all of their endurance, they had drifted away from that which is most important. In all of their conflict against the heretics, perhaps they had even become a little bit proud of their faithfulness in their hearts, and they had forsaken their first love.

We all know the process that John is speaking of here for we experience it all the time. As we think back, many of us can remember the overwhelming joy that we felt when we first accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The relief as that load of guilt was rolled off from our backs. The immeasurable joy as we became aware of the fact that we were now recipients of eternal life, that whatever happened to us here on earth, one day we were destined to rule and reign with Jesus Christ forever and ever. The security of knowing that we were a member of the family of God and that nothing would be able to separate us from the Love of God or remove us from His hand that safely was enclosed around us. The love that filled our hearts for Christ who had come down and rescued us from our helpless condition, taking us from the miry clay and setting our feet securely upon the rock was overwhelming to us. As we think back, most of us can remember this time in our lives.

But then, what happened? Too often there have been times when the gospel message has become dulled by familiarity. Times when those glorious truths have been tarnished by the years. Sometimes sin became harbored in our lives and filled us with bitterness and resentment and clouded the spiritual vision of our eyes. And that first love, where has that first love gone?

Now the reason why we can identify with the process that John was addressing to the Ephesians is the simple fact that this is a universal process. It often happens in human love. Two young people meet and they feel the rush of love, and they think that this is going to remain all throughout their lives. It doesn't. After they marry, disagreements come. And soon they are filled with bitterness and resentment. And so they think that by starting all over with another partner they will correct everything. But it doesn't happen, and life becomes more and more complicated until they are so disillusioned that they are unable to love at all. They have never grasped the true nature of love.

You see, love is not a onetime occurrence. It doesn't matter how deeply one loves at one moment, that is no guarantee that he will love the next day or the next year. Love involves a continuing commitment. Love

involves renewed dedication. And the marriages that are strongest are the marriages where love becomes a daily commitment between husband and wife.

This same process is true in the spiritual realm. Too many Christians feel that the Christian life is a onetime commitment where they accept Jesus Christ and express their love to him, and then they try to live the rest of their lives on the strength of that salvation experience. That is not the Christian life that God designed. Certainly, the salvation experience is critical, even indispensable. One must be born again in order to inherit the kingdom of God. But the successful Christian life must be a daily commitment to God. The Christian who is going to live the Christian life successfully will not do so on the strength of past commitments, whether that be a dramatic salvation experience, or a moving camp dedication, or some unusual experience with God. The Apostle Paul did not live his whole life on the strength of his road to Damascus experience as remarkable as that was. Paul said that he died daily- that he made a daily commitment to God to live for him, to not yield the members of his body as instruments to sin but to yield himself to God- and that was what helped Paul to maintain his first love for the Lord. If we, like the Ephesian people, try to live our Christian lives in the strength of past commitments whether they be salvation experiences, or great trials endured or even great battles fought with heretics as the Ephesians had, we will also lose our first love for the Lord.

3. Conclusion: Now, many of us examining our hearts might be thinking- I have already lost it. I know that I do not have today the love that I had for the Lord when I first was saved. Is there any way to regain that first love for the Lord? Yes, there is, and John will give to us 3 steps in regaining that first love.

a. Step #1- Remember. "Remember the height from which you have fallen." 2:5. Think back and recall the glories of those first days walking with the Lord. You see, too often, we become lulled to sleep in our walk with God. Things are good, they are comfortable. And we don't remember that breathless wonder of that first love. Many years ago when I was a student I heard a saying that I have never forgotten. "The greatest enemy of the best is not the bad, but rather it is the good." Too often that is true. We become satisfied with good things in our lives so that we fail to persevere after the best. Let's face it. A mediocre walk with God is a million times better than being lost in sin. So we can console ourselves with the fact that we are no longer among the ranks of the lost. But a mediocre walk with God is not the abundant life to which Christ calls us, and if we remain satisfied with it, we are accepting second best. We have to remember that first love.

b. Step #2- Repent. The term that is used here very simply means "turn around". If I am walking across this platform and I repent, I turn around and start walking in another direction. Repenting involves a decision to change a course of life. When a person is saved, He must repent from his sinful ways. The messages of John

and Jesus were "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." A person walking down the broad path that leads to destruction must decide that he is going to turn onto the narrow road that leads to eternal life. He does so by acknowledging his sins and receiving Christ's atonement for them. But John isn't talking to those who don't believe here- he is talking to Christians in the church at Ephesus. You see, repentance isn't a onetime event in life. The Christian continually needs to repent from sin, change his mind with regards to various actions in life. And John says that repentance is necessary in regaining the first love.

c. The 3rd step is Do: "Remember the height from which you have fallen. Repent and **do** the things you did at first." 2:5. You see, true repentance always involves action.

What were the things we did at first? What did we do when we first came to know the Lord? Our minds were continuously focused on Christ. Remember? We couldn't stop thinking about him and all that he had done for us and all that he meant to us. We couldn't get enough of the word. We studied the Bible every day, and relished the truths that we saw from God's word. It was so exciting to see those new truths. We prayed and communed with God continuously. We were eager to tell others about our new found faith. Now John says, get back to those patterns if you want to maintain your first love. Remember, repent, do- these 3 steps are critical in regaining that first love.

Happily, Christ's love for us never waivers. The evidence that it never waivers is found in the fact that his care and concern for us is constant. Daily, his Spirit indwells us leading and guiding us into truth, his loving arms protect us, he continues to maintain the environment that we need to go on living- he doesn't waiver, he remains constant. Christ never leaves his first love for us.

As we grow in him, if we are really growing spiritually, our love will be deepened for him, we like him will be maintaining our first love. It certainly will change in some expressions as it deepens and matures, but it will always be there. And to those who overcome, John says, Christ will give to them the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.