

THE CHURCH THAT LEFT HER FIRST LOVE

Revelation 2:1-7

The opening chapters of Revelation describe a marvelous appearance of the glorified Lord Jesus to the Apostle John, who was in exile. This vision overwhelmed John, but the Lord strengthened him with comforting words. Then, He commanded him to "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter." (Revelation 1:19).

In this passage Christ revealed Himself as walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, which candlesticks represent the churches, and as holding the seven stars in His right hand, which stars represent the pastors of the churches. (Revelation 1:20). Ministers of the gospel are compared to stars because God has made them, has fixed them in their proper places, and keeps them there for His glory. As stars receive their light from the sun, so preachers receive their light from Christ. It is their task to reflect the light to others, to direct to Christ, to point out the way of salvation, and to have oversight of the churches. Revelation 1:16 informs us that they are dear unto Him, and are highly valued by Him. They are His, they are in His possession, they are at His disposal, and they are used by Him as instruments to do His work. He upholds, sustains, and protects them. It is wonderful to be held in the hand of the Lord. There is a special security for those who are held in His hand. It is certainly encouraging to know that our Lord still holds His own in the same way today.

"Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write." "Angel" means "messenger." The appointed messenger of God in a church is the pastor. Thus, our Lord addressed His communication to the "messenger," or pastor, to be passed on by him to his congregation. Christ is depicted as the One holding the seven stars (or pastors) in His right hand. In a very real way, the pastor of the church is in the hand of Christ, and is directly responsible to Him for the shepherding of His flock. The work of the candlestick is to make it possible for surrounding objects to be illuminated. The task of the church is to present Christ to the view of a lost world.

Ephesus was on the main route from Rome to the East. It was a populous and magnificent city. Two architectural features adorned it—the Temple of Diana and Theatre. It was a wealthy, cultured, and corrupt community.

The Church at Ephesus occupies a prominent place in the New Testament. We have the account of its planting and progress in Acts. Jews from there were present at Pentecost. Paul wanted to preach there in the early stages of his second journey. He made a short visit to the city at the close of that journey. While there he went into the synagogue and spoke on the one theme that was always on his heart, mainly, Christ and Him crucified. He made a favorable impression, and when it became necessary for him to leave he promised to return. When he departed, he left Aquila and Priscilla there. Later, Apollos arrived and preached, whereupon twelve were baptized, and then he left.

On his third missionary journey Paul came to Ephesus, and preached for three months in the synagogue, then he gathered his disciples in the school in Tyrannus and there he preached to them. He remained in Ephesus nearly three years because of the oppositions and the opportunities. Later Timothy came and gave his best days there. Paul wrote a letter to the Ephesians. The last lines which he penned were to Timothy, the pastor. John, the beloved, spent his last days there. Apollos prepared the soil, Paul planted it, Timothy cultivated it, John watered it, and God gave the increase.

In the early days of its history this church was effective because in it:--

- a. Repentance was preached and practiced.
- b. Faith in Christ was professed in public and appointed way.
- c. Members were endued with power of Holy Spirit.
- d. The preaching was of the right sort.
 - (a) Bold.
 - (b) Faithful.
 - (c) Reasoning.
 - (d) Persuasive.
- e. Line of demarcation drawn between church and world.
- f. Missionary spirit.
- g. Backsliders were reclaimed.
- h. Sinners were saved.

As time passed various changes took place in this church. A generation, or thirty-five (35) years, later Christ dictated our scripture lesson to John and sent it to Ephesus. In this message we note three things:--

I. Christ's Commendation.

Christ always praises the praise-worthy. It is great to have such commendation from His lips. Happy are those who deserve it. He commended them for seven things.

1. Enthusiasm toward achievement. Vs. 2a.

"I know thy works." Nothing escapes His notice--neither good nor bad. Christ notices that which is good among us as well as that which is evil. And He takes far more pleasure in noticing the good than in complaining about the evil. His example in this regard is worthy of our manifestation.

There were no idlers. "Works" refers to actual service. They were active, alert, and aggressive. Their working church was operating on the regions of depravity, darkness, and degradation. Christ does not like to see a church standing still. He did not commend their desires or purposes, but their achievements. Every Christian ought to be a worker in the vineyard of the Lord. It is as natural for the Christian to work as it is natural for the sun to shine. A true Christian wants to do something for Christ. He could not commend a lot of professed Christians today like He did the Ephesians because they do not have any works worthy of commendation.

2. Steadfastness in service. Vs. 2b.

"I know thy toil." Toil is a stronger word than work, and indicates hard and vigorous action: strong effort and the continuance of it. It means to labor unto the point of weariness. Thank God for Christians who are willing to work long and hard for the cause of Christ. There are all too few today. Let us learn to work for Christ with all our might.

3. Patience in trial. Vs. 2c.

"And thy patience." After they had labored for awhile, they did not cease even in the face of discouragement, but they continued their service patiently. In the service of the Lord we must labor, but we must be patient. We must wait until the Lord does the work, wait to see things grow.

Patience is the power to endure and not to faint. It is persistence in toil that produces work. They were long-suffering in waiting for the germination

of a seed and in the endurance of fiery trials. They toiled on when they had trying circumstances. This grace of power is always needed.

4. Intolerance of evil. Vs. 2d.

"And how thou canst not bear them which are evil." The members of the church at Ephesus gave no place to evil. They accepted no apology for it. They could not smile upon moral wrong nor condone impurity. They could not accept the intrusion of the unholy and the impure. Evil is apologized for in our day. Some say that times have changed. That is true, but God hasn't changed, nor the standard of right hasn't changed, nor the attitude of the true Christian toward evil hasn't changed.

5. Zeal for truth. Vs. 2e.

"And thou hast tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them false." They were matured and discerning Christians. Even in that early day, at the close of the first century false teachers, who were emissaries of satan, had arisen, claiming to be apostles of Christ. Before accepting any man as a messenger of Christ, the church at Ephesus tested his teaching to be sure it agreed with God's Word. If it did not, they rejected the teacher and the teaching. They refused to tolerate false teachings. In these days of apostasy this kind of discernment is greatly needed.

6. Faithfulness to duty. Vs. 3.

"And thou hast steadfastness and didst bear for My name's sake, and hast not grown weary." Their fidelity had not been under easy circumstances. Persecution raged, but they maintained their works. They transformed duty into privilege. Their works were achieved under the impulse of and in the power of an unswerving fidelity to duty. Christ commends this church because it did everything from the right motive, that is, for Christ's sake. What we need today is loyalty to Christ.

7. Hostility to error. Vs. 6.

"But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Who were the Nicolaitanes? No one knows. A great Hebrew scholar said that the word is derived from the Hebrew "nicolah", meaning "to eat," and that the term Nicolaitan is, therefore, a mere name of reproach, bestowed upon those wretched sensualists, who make their appetite their god, and consume their lives in making "provision for the lusts of the flesh." Clemens of Alexandria, as quoted by Eusebius, spoke of them as a people who practiced a community of wives, living in fornication and adultery.

Others think they were the Antinomians of the Asiatic Church—"persons who taught that the conduct is immaterial if the faith be right." This belief made the way easy to the most beastly living.

Is there anything wrong with this church? Her members were enthusiastic for achievement, steadfast in service, patient in trial, intolerant of evil, zealous for truth, faithful to duty, and hostile to error. But there was something wrong. We turn now to:--

II. Christ's Complaint.

"But I have against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love." Their first love was the love of espousal. Its elements were simplicity and purity. It was the abandonment of all for a love that had abandoned all. Christ says in effect, "there is much of excellency in you, but I miss the emotion, enthusiasm, and energy of your first love." "You used to be earnest, obedient and happy in My ways and did a lot of work but you have left your first love."

What the Lord had against the Ephesian Church was not something that was easily discernible by unspiritual eyes. It required a spiritual expert to see just exactly what was wrong. It was really not an outward condition of life but "a heart condition." It was something that only the Divine Specialist could recognize and diagnose. But when the Lord says, "There is something wrong with you;" surely it is time for us to take stock of ourselves, and to consider seriously the cause of our spiritual ill health.

Their love for the Lord was growing cold, and He knew it, and He said, "I am hurt by it. You do not love Me as you used to do." Nothing hurts Him so much as when we allow other things to engage our affections in such a way that He is relegated to the second place. If you are a Christian, the first thing that Christ wants from you is supreme love for Him. If there is lacking, all work done for Him is unacceptable.

So serious was this thing in the church at Ephesus that it threatened the very existence of the church. If that trouble was not corrected the Lord would remove the church's candlestick. A declension in love is always followed by a degeneracy in good works. He would remove the testimony of the church for Christ and its power to reflect Him.

This complaint needs to be repeated in every church today. Work, toil and patience are all evident. Never were you busier, but where is thy first love?

1. What was our first love?

- (1) A burning love of deep devotion.
Loved God, His Word, His House, His people.
- (2) A happy love of open faith.
Believed in God and people.
- (3) A Bible-reading and praying love.
Used to read Bible and pray daily.
- (4) A working love.
Wanted to devote life, influence and property to His cause.

2. Where have we lost it?

- (1) In the realm of business.
- (2) In company with worldly people.
- (3) In acts of thoughtlessness.
- (4) In neglecting communion with Christ.

3. What are the evidences that we have left our first love? How can we tell when love grows cold.

- (1) Less interest in spiritual things.
- (2) Less attention to private devotions.
- (3) Less serious views of sin.
- (4) Less concern about personal sins.
- (5) Lack of attendance on public worship.
- (6) Lack of interest in missionary work.
- (7) Lack of interest in the salvation of others.

4. What comes of leaving our first love?

- (1) It dishonors God. He desires our love most.
- (2) It distresses His church which has relied upon us.
- (3) It deprives us of happiness.

III. Christ's Counsel.

"Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent."

1. Remember.

This word urges a recall of our earlier condition; a comparison and a contrast of our past and present estates.

Memory plays a large part in the affairs of the heart. It is a good thing to go back to the place and days of our first love and feed on them again. "Be mindful, therefore, of the heights from which you have fallen." Have you forgotten how happy you once were when first you were saved? Have you forgotten how you found pleasure in the Lord, pleasure in the Bible, pleasure in prayer, pleasure in the church? The heights of love are heights of joy, usefulness and strength. It is love that makes churches useful, powerful and to be desired.

2. Repent.

To repent is to feel sorry for sin and to flee from it. Let us not lay the blame on others, saying that if it were not for them we would be better Christians than we are. Christ says, "Repent!" He means for you to turn back to your attitude of simplicity and purity, and to abandon everything for your first love.

3. Reproduce.

"Do the first works." Reproduce the love and works of your former days as of yore, look forward with pleasure to meetings for prayer and praise. Our love for Him, the love for each other, and for the lost should shine in the dark places of sin, and attract others to Him.