

Reading: **Revelation 2:1-5**

INTRO. Please turn in your Bible to **Rev. 2**, as today I'm going to begin a study on the 7 churches of Asia. I preached about these churches over 9 years ago, but I don't think it'll hurt us to take another fresh look at them again. And today, we're going to look at the church at Ephesus & the unusual letter that was written to them.

In many ways the church at Ephesus was a model church. We know this from what we read in **Acts** while Paul worked with them, & also from **Ephesians**, the letter Paul wrote to this church. For example:

1st ...It was a model church in evangelism. In **Acts 19:10** it says "...all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews & Greeks." Imagine that! Ephesus was a great city, the capital of the Province of Asia, but in just 2 years time while Paul was with them, they were able to evangelize the entire region! They could say that everyone who lives in Asia has heard the gospel! *That's impressive, isn't it?*

2nd ...It was a model church in resisting evil. Ephesus was home to one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world ~ the Temple of Diana (a.k.a. Artemis). It was a massive building 425 ft. long, 275 ft. wide with 360 columns standing 60 ft. high! This temple was built to honor Diana, the goddess of fertility. Basically, the people of Ephesus worshipped sexual reproduction, & so they prayed to Diana to bless their women, to bless their animals, & to bless their fields so they'd all be fruitful & productive! And much of their economy was built on this religion, as they'd make images or shrines of Diana out of clay & silver, & sell them! In fact, in **Acts 19:26f**, we read about **Demetrius**, a silversmith, who stirred up a riot against Paul because his preaching about Christ was ruining business! So, he called together other craftsmen & told how, not only their **business**, but their **religion** was in danger of being destroyed by the preaching of the gospel.

And he was right because in time, the idolatrous worship of Diana ended, & it was largely due to the influence of the church there. When the temple was destroyed for the 7th time in 262 AD, it was

never rebuilt. So, the church in Ephesus was a model in resisting evil.

3^d ... This church was a model in keeping peace & unity. Even though they had both Jews & Gentiles in the church there, they were able to work & worship in unity. They did as Paul said in Eph. 4:3, “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” When false teachers came in, they exposed their error, & refused to let them disrupt their fellowship. When opposition arose, they stood together against them. So peace & unity were the strengths of this church.

4th ... What's more, this church was a model in faith & love. In Eph. 1:15-16, Paul said to these brethren, “Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus & your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.” Paul wrote the Ephesian letter from Rome, & whoever reported back to him about the church reported only good things! This was truly a great church, strong in their faith in Christ, & their love for one another! And you know that had to make Paul feel good; in fact, when Paul mentioned them in prayer to God, he always gave thanks for their example!

Now, we know the church in Ephesus had several years of growth, stability & influence in Asia from the time it was established. So, by the time the letter in Rev. 2 was written, around 96 AD, it's had a long standing place of respect in the community. Also, by this time, it'd be easy to assume the church in Ephesus has a nice building in which to meet, centrally located, with probably many prominent people in the city as members. And most likely, it has a number of well-designed programs in place ~ for the Youth & the Women! Maybe they're supporting some missionaries. This is a busy group!

Then, one day, a messenger comes to Ephesus carrying a letter for the church. It's a brief letter, but it's very special because it's from Jesus Himself! (While John is the author of Revelation, the 7 letters to the 7 churches of Asia are dictated by Jesus!) Look at Rev. 1:11, Jesus identified Himself to John in a loud voice saying, “I am the Alpha & the Omega, the First & the Last,” & “What you see, write in a book & send it to the 7 churches which are in Asia...” Now, can you imagine how these brethren felt as they came together to hear this letter from the Lord? What did He

want to tell them? Did He want to reveal some new truth? Did He want to commend them or correct them? Put yourself in their place; what if you were sitting in that assembly that day. Wouldn't you be a little curious & excited? Of course! You'd hang on every word!

Well, here's what Jesus wanted to say to the church in Ephesus, & remember, it's been about 40 years since the church was established.

1st...**Rev. 2:1**, **"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the 7 stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the 7 golden lampstands...'"** Right from the start, Jesus shows He has all authority. He holds the 7 stars in His hand & He walks in the midst of the 7 lampstands. The **"7 stars"** are identified in **Rev. 1:20** as the angels or messengers of the 7 churches, & the **"7 lampstands"** are the 7 churches. What's important to notice here is that Jesus still walks in the midst of His church! He hadn't left them & He hasn't left us; He's still with us, walking in our midst & watching over us. How comforting that must've been to church in Ephesus, & how comforting it ought to be to us! Jesus still walks in our midst!

2nd...The messenger continues in **vs. 2**, **"I know your works, your labor, your patience, & how you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles & are not, & have found them liars..."** Surely Jesus had been in their midst, hadn't He? Because He had seen how diligent & busy they were! This was an active church! And it was a patient church; they showed patience with one another because everyone's not equally strong in the faith! Also, He let them know how proud He was for their stand for the truth; they didn't let just anybody come in there & preach, even if he claimed to be an apostle of Christ! That didn't mean he was; so they tested them out & found them to be liars! And how important that was then, since they didn't have the complete New Testament to hold in their hand, as we do. How blessed we are that we can pick up the NT, & read everything God has given us to know! They couldn't do that then, so they really had to test the spirits! But, you know, it's no less true for us, because there's so many "lies" being promoted today as the truth! So, we too have to be very careful about what is taught!

3^d ... The reader continues, vs. 3, "And you have persevered & have patience, & have labored for My name's sake & have not become weary." How thrilled they must've been to hear these words of "congratulations" from the Lord! All the years they had worked to defend the faith & uphold the truth against false teachers... Jesus was now giving His own stamp of approval to steadfastness. How pleased & proud they must've felt!

But then, suddenly, the warm praise from Jesus turned to rebuke! (And it's interesting how often Jesus does that... points to the positive before He gets to the negative.) Look at vs. 4, "Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love." What did it mean?

Some have said it meant they left the faith for some doctrinal error. But that couldn't be it because the Lord had just praised them for their defense of the faith. {Look at vs. 6. He commends them again for their stand for truth, "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." There's not much known about this sect, but whatever it was, it was false, & they hated it, & stood against it. So, embracing error wasn't their problem. If this church was nothing else, it was doctrinally sound!

However, there's more to being the Lord's church than defending the faith! There's more to being the church than not tolerating false doctrine. And, sadly, there are some congregations among us who are known only for that! As important as it is to defend the faith, there is something else that needs to stand out in God's people. What is it?

Look at it again. He said, "...you have left your first love." The RSV says, "...you have abandoned the love you had at first." (Good) Moffatt: "you have given up loving one another as you did at first." (Better) Weymouth translates it, "...you no longer love Me as you did at first." (Best) Jesus is clearly our first love, yet for these Christians the fire had gone out! Somehow they had lost their passion for the Lord & the work He'd given them to do! The comparison would be to how you felt when you fell in love with your spouse. Do you remember how you felt on your first date? Or when you got married? There was nothing dull about it!

You were so happy & excited. Even Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, compares the church to the Bride of Christ! Well, think back to those early days in your relationship to your spouse...the "honeymoon" days! *Did you think you could ever love anyone more? Of course not! And yet, today, if you don't love your husband/wife more than you did then, chances are you love them less! Why? Because the commitment & bond that ought to exist between you is gone! You've left your first love; you've stopped loving him/her as you did at first! And that's to your shame!*

Well, the same thing is true about your love for Jesus. If you don't love Him more today than when you first believed, then chances are you love Him less! And it shows up in what you're willing to do, or not do, for Him! It's like the story of the old preacher who came to church one cold Sunday morning, & the church had a gas furnace but an electric blower. The preacher intentionally turned off the gas, but he turned on the electric blower so it was blowing cold air. The people came to church that morning, & it was real cold, but they could all hear the blowers blowing. So, the preacher's sermon that morning was entitled, "*The Blower's Still Blowing, But the Fire's Gone Out!*" Could that be said of you? The blower's still blowing...you're going through the motions... you're going to church every time the door's are open... but the Fire's gone out? There's no passion, no excitement & no zeal for Christ? If so, Jesus would say, **"You've lost your first love."**

That's what happened to the church in Ephesus. They remained strong in their stand for the truth & opposing evil, but over the years they allowed their love for Jesus, their love for one another & the souls of men to cool! No wonder the Lord had 'somewhat' against them. So, He tells them what to do, in vs. 5, **"Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent & do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly & remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent."** So, He tells them 3 things to do: remember, repent & repeat the first works.

1st ... Remember! If they were to regain that fervent, passionate zeal for Jesus, they were going to have to remember what it was like when they first obeyed the gospel! Do you remember when you became a

Christian? Do you remember the love you had for Jesus... how excited & on fire you were for Him! Sometimes, when I go back home, I recall that time, at 13, when my father got up to lead the invitation song, I was sitting beside my mother, & I had to slide passed her to go up front. I didn't tell them, but I'd made up my mind that I was going to give my life to Christ. And that's what we all need to do ~ go back in our mind's eye & remember how we felt about Christ when you obeyed the gospel. It will help rekindle the flame in your heart.

2nd ...Repent! *Repentance isn't just for non-Christians! It's for the church too! And it means to change direction. There were many good things about this church... the blower was still blowing, but the fire had gone out! Their doctrine was straight as a gun barrel but, sadly, it was just as empty & cold as a gun barrel too! So, they needed to repent, & reclaim the fervor they once had for the Lord!*

3rd ...Repeat the first works! *What were the "first works" those Ephesians had stopped doing? We know they were busy doing some good things, otherwise the Lord wouldn't have commended them. But, what's the first & most important work Christ has given His church? It is to evangelize! I believe this was their failure. When you love Jesus, you love to tell people about Him. Remember, the first two years Paul worked with this church, they evangelized all of Asia Minor! They could say everyone has heard the gospel! But, they had lost their first love, & so they had stopped doing the first works of the church.*

*Jesus said if they didn't repent & do the first works, He'd come & remove their candlestick! But, He wasn't talking about His 2nd coming; or destroying the church. The 2nd coming of Christ will take place whether people repent or not. No, He's talking about a providential judgment where He'd remove their **"lampstand"**, i.e. their usefulness, influence & effectiveness in spreading the gospel! And, brethren, I believe that's happened to a number of congregations! They exist, & they may be busy doing things, but they're not reaching anybody! They're not teaching the lost, they're not sending out the gospel light anywhere in the world. The Lord has removed their lampstand! *I don't want that to happen to us, do you?* Let us then, as a church & as individual*

Christians remember how we felt when we first obeyed the Lord, repent of any coldness in our heart, & repeat the first works by reaching out to the lost around us!

This morning, if you are a Christian, ask yourself, "Is my love for the Lord what it used to be when I first obeyed? Is my love for my brethren, & the souls of men what it ought to be?" If not, remember, repent & do the first works. If you're not a Christian, we urge you to turn from your sins, come confess your faith in Jesus, & obey Him in baptism for remission of your sins... as together we stand & sing!