

Look! Listen! - And Overcome!

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

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Look! Listen! – And Overcome!

**"The Beginning of Decline –
Erosion of Our Love for Christ"**

Lord's Day Morning

September 23, 2007

Pastor Jeff Crippen

"You must love Christ with a sincere love, with a new love, with an entire love, with a superlative love; and you must love Him for Himself, and not for anything you get from Him." (James Renwick)

"Of all the things that will surprise us in the resurrection morning, this, I believe, will surprise us most: that we did not love Christ more before we died." (J.C. Ryle)

Each of these great statements touches upon the Scripture before us this morning, this letter of the risen Lord to the church at Ephesus.

NKJ Revelation 2:1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ' These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 2 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and

Sermon Text: Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

"It is a poor worship to move our hats, not our hearts." (Thomas Adams)

"Dead devotion is a living mockery."

"Ordinances without the Spirit are cisterns without water."

"The house of a formalist is as empty of religion as the white of an egg is of savour." (John Bunyan)

"The church has no greater need today than to fall in love with Jesus all over again." (Vance Havner)

have not become weary. 4 "Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. 5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent. 6 "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." '

When did a broken marriage BEGIN to go wrong? All of us know people (perhaps we were even at their wedding), people who were once apparently *fervent* in their love for one another. Yet today their marriage is broken, of if they still live under the same roof – they reside there as strangers, pursuing their own individual lives. Many older people in their latter years, married 30, 40, 50 years or more are living in just such a condition.

And yet, there was a day – there was "that day," – their wedding day. The day of their vows for life. Somehow, in some way, the flame of the intense love began to dwindle and fade, until it

went out. What happened? Or, rather – *when* did that begin to happen?

This morning we come once more to that great ancient city of Ephesus. It really was a cosmopolis – a great city of the world. It was, as we saw last time, a city *devoted* to its goddess. *Great is Diana!* was the cry. Great temples. Economic systems. All wrapped up in this deity that allegedly fell from heaven – from Zeus (cf Acts 19:35).

And in this city there was a Christian church. In those days of John's exile on Patmos, perhaps around 90AD. And it was not just any church, but one (as we heard last time) with a very privileged past. Pastors there had included Apollos, the Apostle Paul, Timothy, and the Apostle John!! So effective was the ministry there that the pagans would complain -

NKJ Acts 19:26 "Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus, but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. 27 "So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worship."

Surely this was a church we would have wanted to be a part of. Wouldn't it have been something to have been there?

Here in this second chapter of The Revelation, we come to still *another* divinely inspired Epistle *to the Ephesians!* This one is much shorter, but its impact may have exceeded that of the first letter because this one could be titled –

"The Epistle of Jesus Christ to the Ephesians"

What would it be to receive such a letter – one from Christ Himself? A letter in which He would tell us, *"I know you. I know your deeds."* What would it be to hear HIM say – *"For this I commend you,"* and in particular – *"But I have this against you"*? Just such a letter came one day to this church at Ephesus. Its words were encouraging, comforting, and then *shocking* – *"you have left your first love. Repent!"*

When did that broken marriage begin to deteriorate? Where might we find the seeds of decline if we could go back and see? It would surely be at that very point when those betrothed to Christ *left their first love.*

THIS is Christ's letter to US – to Christ Reformation Church! It is a call to

repentance and self-examination. It is an announcement to us that the seeds of deadness and coldness and extinction are present now – in you and in me.

NKJ Revelation 2:5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent.

Understand? This is a *warning* to us that the real potential to erode and decay into the likeness of that cold, unbelieving, lifeless, theologically liberal "church" down the road is present in us to any extent that we are guilty of what Christ calls "leaving our first love." And I believe that this is a particularly pertinent time for us to "receive" this letter from Christ. These are relative times of peace and ease for us. There is unity – we are not battling divisive men or the encroachment of some heresy. The church seems healthy and even poised to do more to obey Christ's Great Commission. And yet....

Is there a danger for us then? Yes. Times of peace are more dangerous than in times in the wilderness, as the history of Israel demonstrates, Hear Jeremiah once more –

NKJ Jeremiah 2:1 Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 "Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD: "I remember you, The kindness of your youth, The love of your betrothal, When you went after Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown. 3 Israel was holiness to the LORD, The firstfruits of His increase. All that devour him will offend; Disaster will come upon them," says the LORD.' " 4 Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob and all the families of the house of Israel. 5 Thus says the LORD: "What injustice have your fathers found in Me, That they have gone far from Me, Have followed idols, And have become idolaters? 6 Neither did they say, 'Where is the LORD, Who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, Who led us through the wilderness, Through a land of deserts and pits, Through a land of drought and the shadow of death, Through a land that no one crossed And where no one dwelt?'

You know that this is true for your own heart – *Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.*" We grow careless, indifferent, lazy, in times of ease. Those *living sacrifices* we once so joyfully offered begin to dwindle. The world becomes more charming to us. The Lord's day comes

around and we do not go up to the house of the Lord with the zeal we once had – if we go at all. It is a clear and ever-present danger, this *leaving our first love.*

Let's give ourselves to this Scripture then with diligence this morning –

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says..."

I. Seven Stars/Seven Lampstands

These letters have a generally uniform format –

1. Greeting/Address
2. A "Customized, Situationally-relevant" signature
3. Assurance of Christ's presence - *I know* – with a subsequent commendation/admonishment
4. A Call to hear the Spirit
5. Promise of blessing and reward to those who overcome, this promise also being "customized" to the particular church.

True then to this pattern, the Son of Man addressed the "angel" of the Ephesian church and identifies Himself –

NKJ Revelation 2:1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ' These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand,

who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

We have already mentioned the stars and the lampstands. Christ holds the stars and walks among the lampstands, all of which speaks of His intimate presence, involvement, and knowledge of His Church, of which He is Lord. The stars and the churches are Christ's light in the world, fully reliant upon Him for their "oil." Should He remove them from their place, they would cease to shine. Christ holds. Christ walks among.

Whether the stars be angels or the pastors/elders of each church, Christ holds these messengers in His right hand, ready to send them to speak to the churches. The symbolism is that of intimate knowledge, close communion, and communication as the seven angels are poised to "go and tell" the churches what the Son of Man knows and sees.

NOTE: Is there some aspect here of the Holy Spirit in these 7 stars? Each letter ends with *"hear what he Spirit says to the churches."* And in several places, the Revelation speaks of the Spirit in terms of seven –

NKJ Revelation 1:4 John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to

come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne,

NKJ Revelation 3:1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ' These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

NKJ Revelation 4:5 And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

NKJ Revelation 5:6 And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

NKJ Revelation 8:2 And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

The stars then speak of Christ's communication with His churches through the Spirit. The "angel" is given the message; it is then said to be –

"what the Spirit says to the churches"

Here then is the *Ephesian-specific* signature of the Son of Man to this first epistle.

II. The Ephesian Commendation (vss 2-3, 6)

NKJ Revelation 2:2 "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; 3 "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

NKJ Revelation 2:6 "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Christ's words here are desperately needed by the Church of our day. There is no naïve, mild ecumenism here. The Ephesian believers were zealous to contend for the truth of the gospel. They toiled for and stood steadfastly in the faith. Christ knew this. He saw this. And He commended it. Notice in contrast the situation elsewhere –

NKJ Revelation 2:14 "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught

Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. 15 "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

NKJ Revelation 2:20 "Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.

The church at Ephesus could not tolerate evil men. They knew such men existed. They knew that there IS such a thing as evil men. They had taken Paul's warning to heart –

NKJ Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 "Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 "Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I

did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

At least some of these infiltrators even claimed to be *Apostles of Christ*, but the Ephesians had put them to the test of truth and they flunked. The Corinthians, in contrast, had failed in this –

NKJ 2 Corinthians 11:13 For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

NKJ 2 Corinthians 11:19 For you put up with fools gladly, since you *yourselves* are wise! 20 For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours *you*, if one takes *from you*, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face.

But the Ephesian church had persevered and endured.

NOTE: We should comment briefly at this point on verse 6, as it is part of the commendation given. "*...you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I*

also hate." Christ hates certain men and their deeds, and so shall we if we are in His truth.

Who were these Nicolaitans? They are mentioned one other time in the New Testament –

NKJ Revelation 2:15 "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

The preceding verses read –

NKJ Revelation 2:13 "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne *is*. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.

The "thus" at the beginning of verse 15 seems to connect the Nicolaitans with the promotion of libertinism – encouraging Christians to misuse their freedom in Christ and partake in idolatry and immorality. The

Ephesians were not taken in by this heresy.

For this love of the truth, the Ephesians received Christ's commendation.

"Purity of doctrine is the soul of the church." (John Calvin)

"Zeal without doctrine is like a sword in the hand of a lunatic." (John Calvin)

"The modern cry, 'Less creed and more liberty,' is a degeneration from the vertebrate to the jellyfish." (B.H. Carroll)

III. The Ephesian Admonishment 2:4-5

NKJ Revelation 2:4 "Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. 5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent.

You have left your first love.

From protos, first; leading, foremost, prominent, most important; earlier, former, before

The Lord Jesus' words here are strong – the *nevertheless* is a more intense form of contrastive word than could have been selected. What is this thing that the Lord has against them? This forsaking or abandonment of what He calls their *first love*?

First of all, I conclude that there is a certain indefiniteness here – on purpose. The letter does not go on to lay out the specifics. The Ephesians would have known exactly what the Lord was referring to as their first love. To some extent, we do not know the details of their situation.

Commentators speculate variously as to what this first love must have been. For example –

- Since this church was known to be diligent for doctrinal truth, then some conclude that they had so emphasized zeal for truth that they had become unloving, isolated, suspicious. A kind of “loveless orthodoxy.” The warning then is that a church that is fervent for truth and doctrine is particularly in danger of leaving off their first love.

NOTE: I do not fully agree with that position. The term “loveless orthodoxy” is self-contradictory. If we are truly orthodox in sound doctrine, we will necessarily be obedient to that

truth and love Christ and one another. Loveless orthodoxy is no orthodoxy at all. Furthermore, there is danger in this of encouraging Christians to de-emphasize doctrinal truth so that they can become more “loving.” That is precisely what the church today *does not need to hear*.

Remember, Christ *commends* these Ephesians for their zeal for truth and doctrinal discernment, AND for recognizing the ethical application of that doctrine by rejecting immorality and idolatry. Surely if their motive in this were wrong – ie, loveless – Christ would not have commended them for it. So we must take care in making some definite connection of the sort –

zeal for truth/doctrinal discernment = loveless orthodoxy

- Others discuss whether the Lord means *love for Christ* or, *love for one another*.
- Still others conclude that “first” has the sense of *first in time*, so that the Lord means *that love we once had when we were new believers*.

This is why I believe *first love* is left somewhat vague here. It allows all believers room to take it and examine themselves. YOU have left your first

love. How does that apply to your own heart and situation, you see.

Now, there is some hint as to what this first love entailed given in verse 5. Look at it once more –

NKJ Revelation 2:5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent.

GNT Revelation 2:5 mnhmo,neue ou=n po,qen pe,ptwkaj kai. metano,hson kai. ta. prw/ta e;rga poi,hson\ eiv de. mh,(e;rcomai, soi kai. kinh,sw th.n lucni,an sou evk tou/to,pou auvth/j(eva.n mh. metanoh,sh|jÅ

The Ephesian church was in a *fallen condition*. The Greek verb here is in the perfect tense which points to action in the past that continues in the present. They had fallen from their first love and they were still fallen from that height they once knew. Christ calls them to remembrance, and so the remedy begins for us –

- Remember
- Repent
- Do

Think back. Recall. What? Here is a real key - ...*do the deeds you did at first.*” Does this help us identify this “first love”? Go back, Ephesians. Go back to your early days – perhaps those days when the Apostle Paul was among them. Think on it carefully. What was their church like then? What deeds characterized it? Then compare that history with the present condition they were in – this fallen state. Then *repent and do.*

Failure to heed Christ’s command would result in devastating consequences for the church –

“...*or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent.*”

This is ACTIVE judgment by Christ! He is not saying “look here! You had better get with it or you will die away. Grow or else!” No. Christ says that He will come to them in judgment, and the judgment will be that He will remove their lampstand – He will remove that church from its place. And as to the meaning of this, we can be more certain.

Remember the lampstand in the tabernacle –

NKJ Exodus 25:30 "And you shall set the showbread on the table before Me always. 31 " You shall also make a

lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be of hammered work. Its shaft, its branches, its bowls, its *ornamental* knobs, and flowers shall be *of one piece*. 32 "And six branches shall come out of its sides: three branches of the lampstand out of one side, and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side. 33 "Three bowls *shall be* made like almond *blossoms* on one branch, *with* an *ornamental* knob and a flower, and three bowls made like almond *blossoms* on the other branch, *with* an *ornamental* knob and a flower -- and so for the six branches that come out of the lampstand. 34 "On the lampstand itself four bowls *shall be* made like almond *blossoms*, *each with* its *ornamental* knob and flower. 35 "And *there shall be* a knob under the *first* two branches of the same, a knob under the *second* two branches of the same, and a knob under the *third* two branches of the same, according to the six branches that extend from the lampstand. 36 "Their knobs and their branches *shall be of one piece*; all of it *shall be* one hammered piece of pure gold. 37 "You shall make seven lamps for it, and they shall arrange its lamps so that they give light in front of it.

What did that lampstand do in the holy place? It gave light. It illuminated. It shone upon the table of showbread, that bread being a symbol of Christ.

And this is what the lampstands do that Christ walks among. The church *illuminates Christ in the darkness of the world*. So Christ is telling the Ephesians that unless they repent and do, He will no longer permit them to shine for Him, He will no longer permit them to shine upon Him, He will not permit them to speak for Him in this world.

If they are faithful however, if they heed His words and repent – well then –

NKJ Revelation 2:7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." "

Note carefully this matter of overcoming. It is ONLY the overcomers who are saved! To eat from the tree of life is to have life! It is to be set free from the curse that alienated and estranged man from that tree originally. Heed this matter of overcoming then carefully –

NKJ Revelation 2:11 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." "

Conclusion

Remember. Repent. Do. This is Christ's message to us. And young people – it is in particular Christ's message to you. One day these older faces you have grown up with in this church will be no more. A new generation will have arisen. Will that generation retain their first love for Christ and for one another? Or will that original love once present cool and wane until it is no more – and it is said of Christ Reformation Church – *there arose a generation that did not know the Lord*.

"Does not this righteous upbraiding come home in solemn, searching truthfulness to many *churches*, many *congregations*, many *hearts*? Where is the fire and fervor and devotion of your first love? Is God's word by His old prophet a bygone memory—"I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your espousals?" Has the love of the world, or the love of sin, has neglect of prayer and of the means of grace, dulled and deadened spiritual life—so that there are no kindlings of soul, as once there were at the mention of the name and the love of Jesus? Has a mechanical, formal orthodoxy taken the place of the life of faith and the life of devotion?

What is to be done? Is the dull torpor, the mournful deterioration to be perpetuated? Is the lamp to be allowed to flicker and dim and die away in the darkness, without an effort to resuscitate the flame? No! the Lord's loyalty in rebuking us, is only to prepare the way for a gracious challenge—"Remember therefore from where you are fallen, and repent and do the first works."

However great or ignominious the fall, it is never too late to rise and redeem the neglected past. "Turn! turn!" He seems to say, "that you die not." And turn not by rekindling *a mere fitful glow of ardent emotion*, but by doing "the first works"—the true tests and exponents of *a genuine revival of that love which has suffered so sad a decay*.

The opportunity, however, may be short. If the season of grace and repentance be allowed to pass unimproved—"I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick (or lamp) out of his place." The one glimmering, unfaithful candle is only taking up room in the temple-court, which another would better supply. It is like the barren fig-tree of the parable, drinking in to its worthless stem and branches the summer rains, and dews, and sunshine which would have nurtured abundant fruit in others. In either case, the defaulter must be removed, for needlessly occupying temple-space or cumbering productive ground.

Oh! it is a solemn thought, alike regarding churches and individuals, that it is only by reason of the Lord's *marvelous patience and tolerance* they are preserved. The hour of mercy is on the wing. "Except you repent" trembles on the lips of the infinitely forbearing One. His Spirit will not always strive. If His patience be tampered with and abused—if a church, instead of going from strength to strength, degenerates from weakness to weakness—the long-deferred sentence must go forth! How did it fare with Ephesus? Alas! she knew not the time of her visitation. The *grievous wolves* completed the havoc of the fold—the *waning love* gradually lessened—the *once-bright candle* was quenched in darkness!

And where is the queenly city and her loyal, God-loving church *now*? The place that once knew them, knows them no more—the *pen of desolation* has written on every fragment of her moldering ruins, "I will remove your candlestick out of his place!"

Rev John McDuff, 1871