

First Love

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[0:00] Well, let's pray, shall we? Heavenly Father, thank you for your word and we pray, Lord, that you'd help us to take it in, to feed on it and to grow from it. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Revelation 2, from verse 1, it says, Nevertheless, I have someone against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come quickly unto thee, and I will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

Here's a church that's got a lot going for it. The church at Ephesus had a number of good points. For three years, Paul had preached and laboured to build this church.

Timothy was in charge of it, of the churches in this area. Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila had all ministered here, and John himself had come here for a time. It was a large church. It was a church with committed workers. These people were not a group of pew potatoes. These were people who were labourers.

Contrast that today. John MacArthur said, a preacher well known today, he says, The toil of the average Christian wouldn't exhaust a butterfly. Most Christians are not workers.

[1:52] These folk at this church, they were tireless workers. Tireless in service. They did many good works. They were morally pure. They did not bear those who were evil. They dealt with them to bring evil to account.

They were doctrinally pure. They had stood against false teachers and teachings. They didn't chase the latest fan or fall for every teacher who called himself a teacher of the Bible.

They persevered through hardships. They had not fainted. They hadn't given in despite the hard times they had gone through. A lot of good points about the church at Ephesus, but there was a problem.

The Lord was not pleased with this church. Something vital had gone missing. Something all-important was lacking. God says to this church, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

And our Lord warned in Mark 4 about letting the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things or taking our love from the Saviour.

[2:59] For these folk, other things had come along and taken over God's place. Their love for God was no longer first place. It was a second or third or somewhere else. Where do we, where do you place our love for the Lord?

Our devotion to the Saviour. We've heard about folk in other countries where they're enthused and excited about being in church. They're keen to be worshipping and fellowshiping and serving the Saviour.

And yet, where is our devotion? Where is our closeness to God? Are we as close as we used to be? Who moved? Many churches are closing down.

I've seen former churches, former church buildings, now turn into pub halls. You see the beer kegs stacked against the church wall, what was once a church.

I've actually seen a church in Adelaide that they painted a sign outside this former church and it said, Lucifer's Lounge. They're just mocking it. Just a complete joke about the kingdom of God and what that church was built originally for.

[4:06] To the glory of God, one would have hoped. And now in these places that were once a sanctuary, the people drink and jive their blues away. The church is closed and sold out to the world.

There's still stained glass windows, but now there are disco lights and smoke machines. The once quiet and reverent hall is filled with the vain jingle jangle sound of the pokies.

This is Adelaide, the city of churches. Some church buildings are still actually churches, but God is on the outside knocking on the door.

He has been left down. Our Lord says, Thou hast left thy first love. Someone has said that 90 churches a day are closing. Pastors are giving up.

I know a lot of Christians and preachers are getting discouraged. They're throwing their hands up in the air and saying, it's too hard. They have left their first love. The love of Christ is no longer their overwhelming desire.

[5:06] Their hearts cry. The love of these and of other things has taken Christ's place. Church doors are closing, never to be opened again. Or if they do, they become a restaurant or an op shop or a place of business, a bingo hall or a shop.

As happened in Israel. They painted a sign, Ichabod, the glory is departed. God's glory departed. God's glory has left the church.

The church is faithless and loveless and Christless. And like our Lord says in Matthew 24, He says that the time will come when people's love will grow cold because of persecutions or other things. And this is the problem here at this church at Ephesus. They've left their first love. That love of Christ, that love of God, that love of the Word. They've grown cold in their prayer, in their witness, in their time with God, in their relationship with the Lord.

And we see this in church life sadly in our world. Declining interest in the things of God, poor attendances at church. How can we know if our love for God is growing cold?

[6:18] What are the danger signs? What are the warning signs? Our Lord says in John 14, 23, If a man love me, he will keep my words. Do we obey him?

Do we keep, do we treasure this word, do we treasure these instructions for us, these messages from God? Do we faithfully follow after him and truly seek his will to long to worship and adore him? Samson was a dedicated man of God way back at his birth. His whole life was dedicated to God, dedicated to the service of God.

But Samson flirted with evil. God got crowded out of his life. And in Judges 16, verse 20, it says, that the Lord had departed from Samson.

And amazingly, Samson didn't even realise it. He got tricked. How sad that Samson was so deeply involved in sin that God did not stay around him anymore.

[7:24] Samson was once a great man of God, yet he didn't even realise this. And we too can be careless and make that mistake. Spurgeon puts a question, he says, perhaps you may have lost your first love by getting too much with worldly people.

Who we rub shoulders with, who we spend our time with, who we associate with can affect us adversely. This happened to Samson. He was fooled by the world by his love of other things.

And we know what happened to Samson. Samson, it says, you know, they tricked him and they cut off his hair, he lost his strength, they captured him, and then the captors made him blind.

They poked out his eyes. Imagine that, they poked out his eyeballs. And what an awful state, and he was there grinding in the mill, forced to labour in making the, I suppose, the bread for the captors.

And yet, as he grew, his hair grew, and so too grew his devotion, I think, back to the Saviour. And that was the symbol of his devotion to the Saviour, to the Lord God.

[8:35] And then, we know that the story ends with Samson bringing the house down and destroying the enemies of God. He had a final victory, but his life had a shameful part, a shameful stretch, where he wasn't following God.

And, it probably didn't happen in one giant leap for Samson. It was probably a gradual waning away. And also, with the church at Ephesus, it probably just didn't happen just in one day that they decided not to love God anymore.

It was a gradual thing. They just grew away. Their love grew less. And for a while, their love was great and strong. They came to hear God's word. People were being reached. Wonderful things were happening.

And it was kept during a time of persecution, this church. But then, maybe the people started to pray a bit less. The people who used to pray a lot gradually stopped praying. The people who give, stopped giving.

The people who used to witness to the lost gradually stopped witnessing. Until finally, when the Lord Jesus looked at this church, he says, This I have against you, you've left your first love.

[9:40] They've lost their love for God. And friends, we all need to take stock of each of us, of our lives. Has our love for God grown cold? Can it be refreshed?

So the solution is to turn to the Lord. That's what he says to this church. He tells them one word. He says, Repent. Repent. Go back to where you were.

If you lose something, you often have to try to retrace your steps to see if you can go back and see where it was that you last had it.

I know I lost my car keys lately. I've tried to think back where I was, where I put them, where I have been. And likewise, if you lose your keys, your glasses, or something important that you need, you go back to where it was that you left them.

And like that too, with our love for the Lord, maybe we need to go back. Go back to the altar. Go back to that moment. Go back to that time in your life when you were on fire for God.

[10:44] And go back. Repent. It means to turn around, to turn back to that former commitment, that love.

Maybe it was in a church meeting, in a time of prayer, in a time of having to trust God through a trial. When you knew that love, when you were on fire, you were fervent with that love, with that faith, that we can renew that again.

And repent is a very important Bible word. It's often in the Bible, it was the first words that John the Baptist uttered, repent. His very first word.

And when the Lord sent the 17 out, two by two, their first message was, repent. When Peter preached, he cried out, repent. As the prophets faced rebellious Israel, they spoke with the authority of God, they called on the people to repent.

And repent is a strong word, it's a demanding word, it means a radical change. When you repent, you look at your sin and you turn your back on it, you see how ugly it is, how horrible it is.

[11:52] You don't excuse it, you don't blame it on someone else, or something else, it is your load, it is your way, you made it and you bring it to God. And so we can repent, we can repent of our slackness, repent of our coldness, repent of our unfaithfulness.

The problem with this church wasn't so much their attendance. It says that everything was looking quite fine and dandy. They're giving, they're serving, they're studying their Bible, they were doing all the things, they were going through all the motions.

There was lots of activity in the church at Ephesus, but the problem was that they had left their first love. They had put their love to God, to one side, they learnt to live without it, and God was no longer their main love, their first love.

How about you tonight? Is the Lord Jesus that main thing, is he the main driver in your life? It can be easy just to be busy doing the church thing, and forget what really matters.

That's what happened in the story of Mary and Martha. Mary and Martha, two ladies that were in our Saviour's life, these two ladies, Mary and Martha. Martha was very busy, very active, hustling and bustling, but forgetting the main thing, which is our love for the Lord Jesus.

[13:17] As someone has put it, it's possible to do everything you are supposed to do and still be wrong. if it is not done out of a love relationship with the Lord Jesus. What a tragic step that you might be even very busy in church and still lack that love, that devotion.

God doesn't measure us by our works, he measures us by that faith, by that love, by that heart devotion. What a tragic step to leave the love you felt for Jesus when he delivered you, when he saved you, when he freed you from the chains of darkness, when he gave you a purpose for living. How we need to get back to that again. Brothers and sisters, every one of us, I know I need to refresh that love for God, to refresh that love relationship. It says that the believers in Revelation 12, 11, they love not their lives to the dead.

We know for some folk, as in Africa and as in other countries, where their lives are laid on the line when they become a Christian, when they get baptized, when they stand for their faith in a public fashion, they face dire danger.

And what about you? Will you love not your life amongst the dead? Will you have that kind of commitment, that kind of love for God that will carry your soul above the love of life and above the fear of death?

[14:36] If we love God, we'll love his people, 1 John 5, 1. And if we love God, we will love his word. We'll hunger and thirst after righteousness, but we'll be satisfied and filled with it and we'll be lovers of God.

The Bible calls those who follow him as lovers of God, more than lovers of pleasure. This world is filled with people who are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

There are churches that have fallen away from their love of the truth, from their love for God. And many churches of our day, they become lukewarm, lukewarm. They are a room temperature church.

They've adapted to the climate of the world around them. So, as was talked about in terms of modesty, in terms of the influences around us, they just succumb to the world's opinions, the world's truths, the world's philosophies.

And Jesus says it makes him sick. It makes him sick to see Christians become lukewarm and weak. Someone said this, if all our property rights were revoked and all currency became worthless, how rich would you be?

[15:47] How rich would you be? Everything you laboured for and put in the bank or assets and wealth that you've gathered through life, and it was all just evaporated in the dust, how rich would you be?

That is what will occur to you at the moment of your death. It puts it all in perspective really, doesn't it? What really matters? There's a survey of American church leaders, 59% reject the virgin birth, 71% don't believe in life after death, 54% don't believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and 98% deny the personal return of the Lord.

That's a survey of American church leaders. How does that make God feel? Well, it would make him feel sick, wouldn't it? It's a sick, sick state of the church at large.

Spurgeon said, when we first loved the Saviour, how earnest we were. There was not a single thing in the Bible that we did not think most precious, there was not one command of his that we did not think to be like fine gold and choice silver.

Never were the doors of his house open without our being there. If there were a prayer meeting at any hour in the day, we were there. Spurgeon, when we first loved the Saviour.

[17:04] If there was a scale placed here with two extremes, one hand cold and the other hot, where would we be? Would we be cold? A lost person living life in world stream, not in church, no thought of God, Jesus' name is simply another curse word.

Or hot, boiling hot, boiling hot with zeal for the Lord Jesus, willing to crawl to tell others, here's your last thought at night and your first in the morning.

Every day to renew your offer to him, to use your life, whatever he might ask. Which end are you? Or maybe somewhere in the middle, somewhere in the middle, not cold or hot, lukewarm, just plain church, just a casual kind of Christianity, a when it suits me Christianity, and if it costs me nothing kind of Christianity.

Friends, just one story to close, and it's a story from Africa. A man named Joseph came to Christ out of a Muslim background. A Muslim background, he came to Christ.

One day, walking down a hot, dirty African road, he met someone who shared Christ with him. Then and there he accepted Christ as his Saviour, and the power of the Holy Spirit overwhelmed him with such joy that the first thing he wanted to do was go back and tell his own village.

[18:28] He went from door to door, telling of the cross and the forgiveness of sin. He expected their faces to light up, as his have, when they discovered this wonderful truth.

To his amazement, they became violent. The man seized him and held him to the ground, while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged away and left to die alone in the bush.

He revived and made it to a waterhole where he spent days recovering. He was confused and finally decided that he must have left something out or not told the story correctly.

After rehearsing the message, he returned. He stood in the circle of huts and began to proclaim Jesus. Again, he was grabbed by men and beaten by women, reopening the wounds that had just begun to heal.

Dragged unconscious again, he was left to die. To have survived the first time was remarkable, but to survive this beating was a miracle. Days later, he awoke and determined to go back.

[19:36] This time he was attacked before he even opened his mouth. Before he passed out, the last time he saw was that the women who were beating him had begun to weep.

This time he awoke in his own bed. The ones who had beaten him were now trying to save his life. The entire village came to know Jesus Christ. Isn't that wonderful?

Love for the Lord. Do we have it? Do we have it? Has it waned? Has it grown cold? Have we grown lax and mechanical and lost that real devotion, that true heartfelt devotion?

Praise God, it can be refreshed. It can be restored, renewed. As we take the solution that Christ, our Saviour, gave to that church at Ephesus.

He said, I have this one thing against you. You've left your first love. He says, my message to you is repent. Repent and turn back.

[20:32] Repent. Remember, therefore, from whence they aren't fallen and repent and do the first words. I want to leave you with that challenge tonight. We're going to have a closing prayer and perhaps you might like to make it personal as we bring it to the Lord.

Bring your heart to Him and ask Him to renew your love, to repent where there's need and to draw closer, draw back to where you were, to that first love.

And if you're not a Christian here tonight, then you might like to take this step tonight of making today the day that you trust Him for time and eternity from this moment to receive His eternal gift of everlasting life.

But the first step there too is to repent, to turn from sin, to turn from your own way, to receive the gift that He is offering because of His salvation gift.

in dying for us, He's made that gift offer available for those who will receive it. Let us pray. For those who are not a Christian, you might want to pray along this line.

[21:42] Dear God, forgive me for my sin. I want to receive your forgiveness. I want to receive what Jesus did on the cross for my sin in dying and paying for the price of it there.

I want to come and live for you and for you to live within me. And for everyone, Lord, we pray here tonight, every one of us, we pray, Lord, we pray, Lord, that you help us to see where we've fallen from if we've been slack or growing lukewarm.

Help us, Lord, to renew that zeal, that love, that fervency that we won't be cold or lukewarm but we'll be boiling hot, we'll be on fire with our love for you. With a fervency, with a love that won't grow dim or grow cold but it will grow stronger, ever stronger and will be more and more devoted to you, to follow you, to live for you.

As you give us the grace and help and strength to, by the Holy Spirit's power, we thank you for that. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Thank you.