

# Revelation 1: 9-16 + Revelation 2:1-7

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     So I'm going to read the first paragraph that you have there. This is John speaking. Now, then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands was one like a son of man, that means he looked like a human, clothed in a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest, the hairs of his head were white like white wool, like snow.

His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace. His voice was like the roar of many waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as though I was dead.

But he laid his right hand on me and said, fear not, for I am the first and the last. I am the living one. I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore.

I hold the keys to death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place as for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands.

[ 1 : 2 8 ]     The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. Okay. So Jesus appears.

He has a, there's a vision of Jesus revealing himself. He's revealing himself. All this imagery of the light and the hair and the sword and all this stuff is an image of Jesus revealing himself as the eternal, glorious, majestic, almighty God who has also become man.

And the first thing that he does is he says, I have a message for people. I want you to write this down. In fact, what we're going to get is that he gives letters to churches. He says there's going to be seven letters that are messages to churches.

We're going to read the first one of them in just a second. And these, he's walking among these lampstands and these lampstands represent the seven churches.

These seven churches are representative of all the people of God in all places and all times. They're both specific and general. You've kind of got to get the, this, this vision here.

[ 2 : 3 8 ]     And there's one particular letter that we're going to listen to in just a second. I'm going to read it. It's the letter that's going to the church that's in a town called Ephesus. Now, Ephesus was this town that was on the coast of what's now Turkey, right on the Aegean Sea.

It was a major trading post. It was perhaps the most important church in the New Testament in the first century. The apostle Paul planted the church.

He started it. He stayed there longer than he stayed anywhere else. And they had, they were known for being a church that had strong leaders. They had a, they trained up other pastors and sent them out as church planters.

They were a church with a lot of resources. They were really, they had a very stable culture. There was a spiritual legacy to the church in Ephesus. Here's why we're reading it.

Chattanooga is a place kind of like that. It's a place with a, a stable church culture. There are lots of churches here.

[ 3 : 39 ] In fact, you may not have known this, but Chattanooga is the most Bible literate city in the country. I don't know why that's important, but you know, statistics are out there.

But that's who we are. In fact, our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, in particular, we have exported pastors and ministry people, ministry methodologies.

We've exported resources all over the world that have originated in Chattanooga. And so, there's a similarity between the stable culture of Ephesus and what we see in Chattanooga.

And because of that, the message for Ephesus is a message that we need to hear. I think it'll sound familiar to you. Here's, here's what this letter says. Now, again, it's a weird letter because the revelation is pretty weird, but I think you'll get the point.

Here's the letter, chapter 2, verse 1. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write this, the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

[ 4 : 48 ] I know your works, your toil, your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.

I know you are enduring patiently, bearing up for my name's sake. You have not grown weary. All that's good. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Remember, therefore, where you have fallen, repent and do the works that you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.

Yet this you have, you hate the work of the Nicolaitans. Nicolaitans were like an early heresy. And so, yeah, they've been working against the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is the paradise of God.

[ 6 : 00 ] The key phrase here, verse 4, But this I have against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. They've abandoned their first love.

I want to look at that. Let's just look at it really simply. What was their first love? How did they lose it? Or how could one lose it? And then how do you get it back?

That's all I want to look at. What was it? How'd they lose it? How do you get it back? This letter is really fascinating. In fact, all seven of the letters, you can study this on your own, they all follow the same basic pattern.

If you read it, it's really repetitive. And so I just want to walk through that pattern to kind of explain what's going on in the letter. We won't spend too long on this. So the first thing is there's an address, right?

Right back at verse 1, to the angel in the church in Ephesus. That's kind of weird. To the angel. That's just talking about the fact that God is treating all of these little house churches in Ephesus as one body, as one culture.

[ 7 : 01 ] Kind of like all the churches in Chattanooga. It could be called the church in Chattanooga. And that there's an angel with them reminds you that the church of God is overseen and preserved and protected by God himself.

That God's presence is with us as his people. And then it says who it's from, the author. That it's a description of Jesus in the vision that John saw.

That's why I read chapter 1 so that you would recognize this is Jesus holding the seven stars, walking among these lampstands, whatever that means. And then there's this commendation, right?

What's good? Verse 2 and 3. I love this phrase. I know. Jesus knows. He sees what the churches are like. And what are they like?

I know your works, your toil, your patient endurance. How you can't bear with those who are evil. You've tested those who call themselves apostles and are not. You found them to be false. I know that you're enduring patiently, bearing up for my name's sake.

[ 8 : 05 ] You've not grown weary. What does that mean? That they're testing to see whether something's true or false. It says that they have a passion for the truth. They know the truth.

They love the truth. They defend the truth. That's what this group is like. Did you see the verbs? That you, I know your works and your toil and your endurance. It's, this church has done a great job of proclaiming the truth of the scriptures.

They've done a great job at it. There's a lot to love about it. In fact, at Grace and Peace, one of the things we say is, we want to have a very clear gospel doctrine. We want to understand and proclaim the truth of these scriptures.

That's why I hold this thing when I stand up here. I want to be clear. What are we about? We're about the scriptures. This is so important, but there's not just a commendation of what's good. There's a condemnation in verse four.

But I have this against you. You've abandoned the love that you had at first. So what's wrong? What does that mean? You've abandoned what love? I mean, it could be the love of God, right?

[ 9 : 14 ] You had a love of God and now you've stopped. It could be that you've had a love for the other Christians, love for the church. It could be that you've had a love for outsiders.

But what could it be? There's actually a couple of clues that help us understand this. The first clue is this, is the vision from chapter one that I read. Did you notice that Jesus is standing in his glory and he's there and he's among these seven lampstands?

What are these lampstands? It's Hanukkah after all. So you've seen menorahs around, I'm sure. A menorah is a lampstand. It's usually put on a table. It's got seven branches going up.

That's seven, meaning a picture of completion. There were 10 menorahs in the temple of God. And in fact, probably those 10 were maybe not on a table, but were put on long stands.

So they were about the height of a person. And there were 10 of them going up the sides of the temple and their purpose was to light up the temple. It was supposed to show that God's presence in the temple was a light so that people could see a light in the darkness.

[ 10 : 24 ] That's the purpose of the menorah is to show forth the light of God. Now in this vision, there's not 10 though. There's seven. Why?

Well, seven in the revelation, there's all these numbers and things. But seven is this key number that talks about the fullness. There's seven branches, seven lampstands. All that is saying is the churches that are represented here are all the churches in all the world.

All believers at all times and places are represented as this, by this light. Here's the second little clue.

So it's not just the presence of those. But in our chapter, at the beginning of the letter, Jesus is walking among these lampstands. Now, I think this is super cool.

He's not just standing there. They're not just decorations in the temple. Jesus is walking among them. What that means is it's a pictorial reminder. It's a visual reminder. Both that Jesus is present with the churches and that our fundamental identity as the church is to be a light.

[ 11 : 36 ] We are God's light to this world. Jesus, it's fascinating. Jesus calls himself. He says, I am the light of the world.

And then he says, I am sending you as lights to the world. It's like the difference between the sun and these candles on the menorah. He is the sun shining, giving light to all the world.

But we are these smaller little lights. Our fundamental identity as the church is to reflect the glory of God, to shine forth in a small way his hope and his light and his salvation.

And then when you get to the warning in verse 5, he says, you know, you guys have lost your first love.

So here's what I'm going to do. If you don't repent, I'm going to take away your lampstand. See, what that means, I think when you put all these clues together, what that means is when they lost their first love, what they lost was their fundamental identity as a lamp.

[ 12 : 45 ] Their lampness went away. They stopped pursuing the idea that they were a light to the nations. Their love of the non-Christian had gone away.

That's what they lost. They lost their first love, their love for the outsider. Somewhere along the way, this church in Ephesus had retained their love of like doctrine and Bible and truth and, you know, structure and all these kinds of things.

Defending the truth. They have a love for other Christians. They're planting churches. They want to see the church grow. They have all these good things, but they have lost a love for people who are not yet in the room.

They lost their passion. They lost their passion to proclaim and to display the glory of God in the world. To put it in our more familiar context, they retained a love for gospel doctrine, but they lost a love for gospel culture.

They stopped doing the hard work of creating a gospel culture. See, at its core, a gospel culture is a reflection of the love of God.

[ 13 : 58 ] I mean, this is what we talk about at Christmas, right? Why did God send Jesus into this world? Well, Jesus told us this in John 3, 16, you know, just watch some football. Somebody might hold a sign up.

That was really more in the 70s, but, you know, it still works for me. You know, God so loved the world that he sent Jesus.

Not God hated the world and was so pissed at it that he sent Jesus to condemn it. Not God was so irritated that he needed to get to the next chapter of human history.

So he sent Jesus. Not God was so angry at some people that he picked the really good people that we call Christians and he pulled them out so that they don't have to be with the rest of the riffraff.

So he sent Jesus. That's not the message. God so loved this world. He loves the people of this world. He loves what he had created.

[ 14 : 58 ] And because of that, he has sent Jesus to save this world and to gather his people to him. And so as a shorthand, what we say at Grace and Peace, that a gospel culture is just simply a place where people are treated better than they deserve.

They're treated better than they deserve. And that's what Ephesus lost. That's what they lost. How is it that a church loses their first love? That's the second thing.

How do you lose this? Well, I can't say too much about Ephesus because we don't get a whole lot of details about what was going on in their particular context. But I think we can make some general observations that are more applicable to us.

So I've got three dangers for you, just quickly. The first way that we could lose our love is that we could become a church that's consumed by our own difficulties and challenges.

I mean, you know how this goes. You know, any organization where you get a bunch of people in the room, you get a bunch of problems, right? Just gather a bunch of people like us together, you're going to have problems.

[16:04] You're going to have problems. You know, tragedies happen. People die. People get cancer. People lose their jobs. Tragedies happen. Sin happens.

We sin against one another. Things that, things come to light that we don't want to come to light. We sin against one another. We have fights and disagreements.

They all happen. And in those moments, when churches are faced with those kinds of challenges, they have the temptation to circle the wagons, right?

To retreat inside into this self-protection. Make a little cocoon of the church life. We all get together. We bring each other meals. And we hide away. It's normal.

See, we tend to see mission. Love of neighbor. Love of outsider. We're going to see. We're going to see. We're going to see. We're going to see. When things are going well, we can add that on when everything else is going right at church.

[17:09] But that impulse is a failure for us to remember that difficulty and loss is not just the state of being for people who are in the church, but it's the state of being for everyone in this world.

Everyone experiences this loss. And when we refuse to let our weakness and our vulnerability to operate out of our weakness and vulnerability, we lose the opportunity to proclaim how sufficient the strength of Jesus actually is.

You see, if we only proclaim Jesus when things are going well, we distort the message of grace.

See, what we're saying is that grace is for the people who have things who are working right. Grace is for the people who have it together. But grace is not just for the people who have it together.

Grace is for the people whose lives are disasters. And the only way that we can proclaim that is if we do it in the midst of our disastrous circumstances, in the midst of our tragedies, in the midst of our sin, in the midst of our conflict.

[18:20] So that's the first thing. We can become consumed by our own difficulties and lose our first love. The second thing is you can become a church that becomes fearful and despairing in the midst of a hostile culture.

I suspect this was probably the root of it for Ephesus. You know, I think this is probably what the Ephesians experienced. It's probably, frankly, the biggest danger for us in 2023 or 2024 as it's happening.

See, Ephesus was this hub not only for the early church. It was also a hub for the Roman pagan culture. There was this massive temple.

I believe it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. A massive temple to the goddess Diana. And it dominated the culture in Ephesus. In fact, what you see in the book of Acts is Paul is planting a church in Ephesus.

The religious leaders and the business leaders in Ephesus violently push against these early Christians and attack them.

[ 19 : 28 ] See, it's easy for us to remark and to look around that we're living in the midst of a world that is not just... You know, for the last few years it has seemed that we've been very anxious about the changes that we're experiencing in the world.

About the changes in society. We're anxious about the direction that things are headed. But I feel like we're changing from just being anxious about that to starting to get really angry about it.

And there's a lot of aggression that has begun to come out and fear. You see, some Christians are responding to a hostile culture by retreating in.

By yelling a lot, particularly online. And by adopting all kinds of aggressive strategies because they need to fight back. But you see, fear and despair will destroy a gospel culture.

Because fear and despair are fundamentally self-protective. See, they have no ability to deal in a healthy way with people who are different from them.

[ 20 : 39 ] Or people who they perceive as a threat. See, fear and aggression is only self-oriented. Now, this is the right time for us as the church to not be fearful.

But to realize that we have in a manger is the king of all kings. The one who has come and who reigns over this world even now. This is a time for us as the church to stand up and to have a clear proclamation of gospel doctrine.

But to live out a robust gospel culture. A gospel culture that says that yes, even people I might disagree with are treated better than they deserve.

That's what it looks like right now. That's a danger for us. That's the second danger of how we can lose our first love. The third danger is that a church can become enamored by its own successes.

You know, this is the most insidious way to lose your first love. You know, when things go measurably well. Right? When you have a lot of, when a lot of people show up.

[ 21 : 49 ] And when there's a lot of excitement and energy. And when, you know, there's a lot of money or institutions are being built. All those kinds of good things. We begin to think, we begin to think, well, you know what?

Aren't we great? God is, God is working in us because we are so great. There's something so unique about us that has gotten us this blessing.

You know, we did it right. God blessed us. That's all there is to the story. You see, it is so easy to be successful and yet to fail to achieve the mission.

Do you remember Walker Percy's famous line? You can get all A's and flunk life. It is easy, friends, for us to confuse successful churchiness, success in culture, with actually doing things the way that God has called us to do.

In fact, that may be the best explanation for the state of the church in America right now. It's that we've confused our place in culture with gospel culture, with a gospel faithfulness.

[ 23 : 09 ] You see, no matter what happens to us at Grace and Peace over the next year or two, we must not lose our first love. We must not think that because people might come that we are successful and that we don't have to do the work of loving our neighbor and creating a gospel culture.

We have to be a church that in our life and in our proclamation, and not just from up front, but from every person who walks in these doors, that we proclaim loudly the words that are at the top of our program to all who are weary and need rest, to all who sin and need a Savior, to all who desire grace, we open our lives, not just our church, but our lives to you.

That's how we lose it, is to not think that way. Okay, so they had a first love, they lost it, and how do we get it back? How do we get it back if we have lost it?

How do we preserve a gospel culture or find it? Well, I think there's some hope here for the Ephesians and for us. Did you notice in verse 5, the exhortation, the exhortation element of this?

God's first response is, repent. Verse 5, Remember from where you've fallen, repent. Repent means to stop what it is you're doing, to turn back the other direction, and to go in a different way.

[ 24 : 45 ] God's message to His people is to stop it. Things aren't going right. Stop, turn around, go back. You know what you ought to do. Return to me.

The beautiful thing about this is, God never leaves His people without a way of restoration. God never leaves His people without a path towards restoration.

If you find yourself in the midst of a place that you feel stuck and alone, and away from God, and you have no idea what to do, God has not left you without a path towards restoration, but that path is repentance.

Repentance. It's turning. And then there's a promise. Verse 7, He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who conquers, that means to the one who does this, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is the paradise of God. What a beautiful image.

[ 25 : 47 ] The tree of life. That takes you back to the Garden of Eden, right? It also takes you back to the end of the Revelation. There's a picture of the city of God where the tree of life is in the center of it.

The tree of life just brings this image of intimacy, of innocence, of communion with God.

The thing that we long to have true of us. The same thing that Adam and Eve had, and what God is saying is, look, for those of you who preserve this gospel, this gospel culture, you're going to find the kind of intimacy and life that you long for.

The path to find this is through this gospel culture. We want people to discover God's grace and peace, and that can only happen as we pursue this gospel culture.

I think this is amazing because this is what grace looks like, right? God's glory in His grace is revealed right in this passage. God doesn't stand far off from His failing people, but His church, in the midst of their faltering and failing in Ephesus, He comes directly to them, and He says, here is the path out of this, and I want to lovingly lead you out.

[ 27 : 12 ] He's inviting them to turn around. You know, God is so good and kind. He is so different from me.

You know, when I deal with my kids, there's yelling, there's shaming sometimes, there's impatience, there's outbursts, and angry, there's angry outbursts, but with God, there is simply a quiet invitation.

When you turn to Jesus, there is overwhelming grace and mercy and joy that is on offer for you. That is what grace looks like.

That's what a gospel culture looks like. And when we experience that, it should go out to our neighbors and our friends.

One of the best examples of this is from Les Mis, you know, of a gospel culture at work. You know, you've heard the story of Jean Valjean, I'm sure, but one of the characters that I really like even more than him is Bishop Muriel.

[ 28 : 20 ] I'm not sure I'm saying that right because I don't speak French, nor do I know many Frenchmen. Bishop Muriel. I'm sure some of you will correct me later. Just know that will be irritating.

So, just kidding. We actually get a lot of background on Bishop Muriel in the story. It turns out he comes from this kind of noble family.

He's well off. He's stable. He has a happy marriage to his wife. Things are going well for him. The French Revolution is happening, and so he flees and is kind of living abroad in Italy.

He and his wife are happy there. Unfortunately, tragedy strikes and she dies. And so, something changes. You're given the hint that God has met Bishop Muriel while he's been in Italy mourning his wife, and when he returned to France, he had become a priest.

But he was a priest that was not particularly well known. He was a country priest, but what happens is he has this chance encounter with Napoleon, and he compliments Napoleon. And so Napoleon, because of the compliment, because he's, you know, insecure and powerful, he elevates him from just a country priest to a bishop.

[ 29 : 34 ] So he lives in this nice big house, and yet, even though he's been given this much bigger platform, he still operates like a common, compassionate country priest.

He even gets this nickname, Monsignor Bienvenue. Bienvenue. I think that's right. Welcome. Bienvenue is welcome in French.

Thank you. Here all week. Monsignor Welcome. What he decides to do is he moves into the, he moves into the small little country hospital that is serving the people around so that the hospital can move into his big palace.

He lives off of 10% of what he makes every year, and he gives the rest of it to charity. Victor Hugo describes him like this.

This is fascinating. He says, There are men who toil at extracting gold, but Muriel toiled at the extraction of pity, we might say of grace.

[ 30 : 43 ] Universal misery was Muriel's mine. The sadness which reigned everywhere was just an excuse for his unflinching kindness.

So, you know the story. One night, Bishop Muriel is at home, and Jean Valjean shows up at his door asking for a place to stay. He welcomes him in. He feeds him and gave him a bed, and during the night, Jean Valjean took his silver and left.

Of course, he gets picked up soon, and the police bring him back to Muriel's door and tell him that they found all of the bishop's silver in his knapsack, in Jean Valjean's knapsack.

And Muriel tells the police that, no, actually, he had given all the silver to Jean Valjean. He shouldn't be arrested. He should be freed. And the police know this is just a ruse, and Jean Valjean knows that it's not true, and yet he's stuck in this moment.

In fact, Bishop Muriel says, you know, you actually forgot to take the candlesticks with you. So after the police leave, it's just Muriel and Jean Valjean, and Muriel gives him again the candlesticks, and he says, take this silver and use it to become an honest man.

[ 32 : 05 ] And the story of the rest of Les Mis is the story of Jean Valjean being changed by this act of grace. This act of grace becomes something that changes him.

The rest of the story is one of both repentance and renewal. It's a story of Jean Valjean becoming the man that he always wanted to become because of this moment of grace.

But as a sign of Valjean's repentance, he takes the candlesticks. He doesn't sell the candlesticks like the rest of the silver. He takes them, and he puts them on his mantelpiece in his home.

And as you get to the end of the novel, the candlesticks come up over and over again. And in fact, in one of the last scenes where Jean Valjean is dying, he's dying in the light of the candlesticks in his room.



It makes me wonder if Victor Hugo is playing off of this idea of the candlesticks in Revelation 2 and throughout the Bible, the idea that grace becomes the light by which people see the glory of God, the light by which they know grace, the light by which they see renewal and new life coming, being born in them, the light by which they find hope in the midst of dark places.

[ 33 : 32 ] Even at that moment, there was light shining forth because Jean Valjean's life had become not just a life of despair, but had become a life of hope, a life of renewal, a life that wasn't just tied down to his own sins and failures, but a life that had transcended it, a life that had become a place of grace.

Friends, we are to be a light like that. Your life is to be a light like that. This church is called to be a light to the nations, a beacon, a lighthouse, calling in desperate souls, people desperate to be treated better than they deserve.

Because this is a world that treats you exactly for what you deserve. And worse. But when you walk in here, you get treated with grace.

It would be amazing if this church had such a clear gospel culture and people who never lost their first love, but were committed to proclaiming that gospel culture to everyone that we meet.

That is our calling. And on this Christmas Eve, what we see is that that calling has been empowered because of the miracle of God's entry into this world.

[ 35 : 08 ] If he can come in by that grace, we can certainly be empowered to live in his grace. May that be so for us. Let me pray. Our God, we praise you that on this Christmas Eve, we can reflect on who you are calling us to be.

Lord, we confess that we don't have the ability to do that on our own. To hold this gospel doctrine and gospel culture together. We don't know how to do it. We fail at this.

Ephesus was a great church and they failed. Lord, would you preserve and protect us? Would you send your Holy Spirit to us? Might in our proclaiming the glory of God, might his glory so shine forth out of our lives that it would lead to the transformation of other people?

Lord, that is our hope. That's our dream. Would you make it a reality for your glory's sake? Would people forget about grace and peace, but would they see Christ and the hope that is in him?

For we pray it in his name. Amen.