Return to the First Love

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Date: 08 March 1998 Preacher: Paul Barker

[0:00] This is the PM service on March the 8th, 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled Return to the First Love and is from Revelation chapter 2, verses 1 to 11.

If you arrived early enough this evening, you would have seen an advertisement for travelling to Turkey. Simply Turkey, it says. The locals are welcoming, the antiquities fascinating, the beaches are splendid, the food delectable, and the markets are treasure trove.

Nobody knows the real Turkey as well or covers as many thousands of miles each year along the spectacularly beautiful coastline in quest of further hidden delights as Simply Turkey. Now, I love travelling.

Doesn't that make you want to go to Turkey and see the great sights and trust an organisation called Simply Turkey? to tell you what you need to know about a wonderful place? Well, if you're like me, you do like travelling and you do like seeing out-of-the-way exotic type of places.

And invariably, you buy the guidebooks and you look at the photos and they're all very appealing. So you take out your rough guide for Turkey, you've got all these brochures from the Turkish Tourist Bureau, beautiful, seductive pictures of ancient Ephesus and so on, and off you go.

Because what we're doing tonight and the next few weeks is going on a tour of Turkey.

But I'm afraid it's out with the rough guide. I don't think much of the Turkish Tourist Bureau either.

Well, because our guide is Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Revelation 2 and 3 tells us what we need to know about Turkey.

Well, at least ancient Turkey. But it's actually from that that we can learn lots of good things for ourselves today. I'm going to show you a map so you get a bit of a feel for ancient Turkey.

This is the south-western corner of Turkey, the Mediterranean Sea at the bottom. Greece is off to the left. The islands that you can see in the middle of all, or to the left-hand side of the map, they're mainly Greek islands.

One of the reasons Greece and Turkey today are fighting is because of these islands. Patmos is labeled because that's the island where John is at the moment when he gets the visions and words of the book of Revelation. If you want to go to Istanbul, then you have to go a bit further north, and Gallipoli is also off the map to the north.

[2:30] That's to try and give you a bit of guidance. Tonight we're starting at Ephesus, and then we're going to travel later this evening to Smyrna. Because what we find in Revelation 2 and 3 are seven snippets of seven different towns.

They're the ones that are labeled there on the map. And we're actually going to travel clockwise, starting from Ephesus, going up to the top, and then down, heading towards the east.

And each of the snippets has the same ingredients. It begins by saying, to the angel of the church in whatever town is mentioned. Then it says, these are the words of Jesus.

Except it doesn't say Jesus. It says, these are the words of him who is. And then a description of Jesus is given. And all but one of them is based on the verses that Janelle read out for us at the beginning of tonight's service.

Then it talks about, I know something. Jesus is saying, speaking at this point. I know something of your deeds, usually good deeds first. And then I know something of your evil or bad deeds as well.

[3:33] There are a couple of exceptions to that. Indeed, Smyrna, when we get to her tonight, doesn't have any bad deeds mentioned. Then there's usually a statement, but not always, of, I am coming.

So therefore repent. Some sort of statement of judgment. Then comes a promise, right near the end of each of the snippets, to the person who overcomes or conquers, and then a promise is given to that person.

And finally, though sometimes it's in reverse order with the promise, let him who has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit says to these churches. So pack your suitcases, get your guidebooks out, get ready because we're going travelling tonight and the next few weeks to Turkey.

And the first place that we'd see as our boat pulls into the harbour, we're going to see up here now. This is the queue for Vaughan. Because this is Ephesus.

Glorious ancient Ephesus. The boat harbour would have pulled into the top right of the picture, just a few hundred metres down a very ornate colonnaded road. And we'd be walking up that road, staring at this ancient theatre that could seat 24,000 people.

[4:45] That's it today, in its excavations. Sadly, just a few years ago, Elton John played at a concert there, and the volume was so loud, they've had to rope off the top tiers of this amphitheatre because it created instability.

Isn't that disgraceful? After all those years, some modern rock pop concert almost destroys the thing. Well, Ephesus was a major port, a major harbour, 2,000 or 1,900 years ago.

It's the closest of the towns to Patmos. So it's the first one in John's thinking as he writes these snippets and letters to seven churches. But it's no longer a harbour.

Over the course of the last 1,900 years, probably actually the last 1,500 years, the river that it was on has silted up. Ephesus is now 10 kilometres from the coast.

That's a long distance, given that it's only 1,500 years since it was a busy port. In John's day, in the first century AD, it was an elegant city. A quarter of a million people perhaps lived there, although it may have been a bit less.

And its ruins are magnificent. That's why I've got the picture underneath the overhead here. This is the main street of Ephesus. Columns all the way, mosaics on the roads in different places, marble here and there, fountains, public toilets, temples, all sorts of pillars, and a very ornate place.

And then down at the far end, you can see two-storey facade of the ancient Library of Celsus. Magnificent ruins, the best probably in Europe, apart from Pompeii, near Rome.

In John's day, there were six imperial temples there, that is, temples that are dedicated to the Roman emperors, as well as, of course, other temples as well. It was the most important city in what was called Asia.

Now, we think of Asia as being way off north of Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore and so on. But Asia was a province of what is modern Turkey, along with places like Bithynia and Galatia.

And Asia was the part in the western end of Turkey. And indeed, it's sometimes called pro-consular Asia because it was governed by a pro-consul whose headquarters was in Pergamum.

[7:03] But Ephesus was the main city of that area, even though it wasn't the capital, a bit like Canberra and Sydney, I suppose. So Ephesus is the Sydney of ancient Asia.

It was also the home of one of the seven wonders of the world, the Temple to Diana, or Artemis, nothing to do with the princess who died last year. The Temple to Diana was four times the size of the Greek Parthenon, which some of you may have been to in Athens.

It was massive. No wonder it was the seven wonders of the world. So this is the town that we're visiting first in our travels. This is the town where Paul came on one of his or two of his missionary journeys.

This is the town where Paul spent perhaps two, even maybe three years converting people until he was thrown out. There was in fact a big demonstration right here in this very theatre that you can see this picture of.

And Paul was expelled from the city. One reason was because there's so many conversions to Christianity that the silversmiths were going out of business making idols to Diana and Artemis.

[8:11] So that's Ephesus in the ancient world. But our interest, of course, is not in a tourist site. We're not here to be tourists and see the glamorous places.

We're here to learn something about the spiritual state of the church. And that's what the guidebook we have, Revelation 2 and 3, is all about. Chapter 2 begins by saying to the angel of the church in Ephesus.

Maybe that means the messenger or maybe it's a sense of spiritual government over the nation. And these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

It's a description of Jesus and it comes from chapter 1. So anyone who's read chapter 1 will understand clearly this is Jesus in heaven that's being described. The seven stars that he holds, they're the angels.

It signifies, I think, the control that Jesus has over the angels governing these seven churches. And he's walking among the seven golden lampstands. That is, the lampstands are churches.

[9:12] We saw that last week. So this is Jesus walking amongst his churches. And I think the picture is of a Jesus literally, in a sense, walking, having got off the boat from Patmos, now walking into Ephesus and then soon he'll walk up to Smyrna and then to Pergamum and then on to Thyatira and so on through the seven churches.

For these words that we read conveyed by some messenger we don't know whose name are really the words of Jesus walking amongst his own churches. For Jesus, after all, is the Lord of the church, whatever the state that church is in.

And Jesus firstly commends the Ephesians for two things. He commends them for their toil and secondly for their patient endurance. So verse 2 says, I know your works, that is, one, your toil, two, your patient endurance.

And the toil is described first, I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers. Literally, you cannot endure evildoers. A general term for unrepentant sinners in their midst.

Reminds us, I think, that when Paul was still alive and when Paul was still a missionary, he met, for the last time, the elders or leaders of the church at Ephesus.

And he warned them that savage wolves would come in amongst them in order to destroy the flock. Could it be that these are they here, these evildoers, who it seems may have come in from the outside in order to try and destroy the flock?

But secondly, the toil of the Ephesians is described at the end of verse 2, you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them to be false.

And again, in Acts 20, when Paul spoke to those Ephesian elders, he issued another warning. Not only would there be savage wolves from the outside, but from within the church, there would be those who taught false things, and they also must be resisted.

The apostles are not so much the 12 apostles of Jesus, but it seems the name apostle applied to any person who was an itinerant missionary, who would go from place to place to preach and teach things about God.

So the Ephesians are being praised here, one, because they've resisted and not tolerated evildoers, and two, because they've resisted the heresy of the false teachers in their midst.

Jesus applauds that action, and as he does today as well. It's a warning to us in our modern day that we must not tolerate evildoing within God's church, that we must not tolerate heresy within God's church either.

In whatever name people speak and preach untruth, we cannot afford to tolerate it in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. That requires well-taught Christians who can identify truth and falsehood.

It requires steadfast Christians, loyal, solid, faithful Christians, who know what is right and wrong and keep to what is right, who resist the practice of wrong and the teaching of wrongdoing.

And the Ephesian church is well-taught. That's one reason why in our day and age we need more good Bible teachers, so that Christians are strong and solid to resist heresy and evil doing.

It seems then you see that Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders all those decades ago has been heeded. The Ephesian church has done what Paul warned it to do and it has resisted the evil doing and the heresy.

[12:56] That's the first thing that it's applauded for by Jesus Christ. And the second is its endurance in verse 3. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name and that you have not grown weary.

And this is not just talking about living a long life and so on. It's talking about facing opposition to the Christian gospel. These are Christians who are facing some sort of opposition if not persecution.

And Jesus is praising them, indeed giving thanks to them. for their endurance for his own name. These are Christians whose faith is under pressure from their society, from people, their neighbours, their friends, maybe their family, and they are resisting that pressure.

Indeed, the book of Revelation, of course, is a whole book for Christians who are facing opposition and persecution, exhorting them to persevere in their faith.

faith. Well, they're the good ticks, the gold stars on the report of the Ephesian church. But it's not all gold stars because we find some black marks as well.

[14:13] But I have this against you, verse four says, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen. Repent and do the works you did at first.

first. These Ephesian Christians have lost their first love, their love for the Lord and their love for each other. We don't know why, we don't know how it's evaporated, we don't know whether they exercise some love or none at all.

They've just been praised for very important things and yet these are Christians who for some reason and in some way are lacking the fervor of love that they had when they were first converted whenever that was in the past.

There's no doubt they're still Christians. That's clear in that they're still a church. But the warning here is a very serious warning. It's not just saying, oh look, there's a little matter of love to try and tidy up.

This is a serious warning. Lack of love in the church is dangerous. It's not an optional extra for Christians. Christians are and must be people who love God and each other.

[15:32] Reminds us of the warning in 1 Corinthians 13, that famous poem of love that's so often wrongly, in my opinion, used at weddings. If I have all these gifts and all these abilities but have not love, I am nothing.

Lack of love is dangerous in a Christian church or community. If we have no love, then we face the judgment of ceasing to be God's people, Jesus' church.

That's the threat of verse 5, the second part. For if you do not repent and do the works you had at first, that is return to your first love, Jesus will come to you. Not in the second coming thinking about coming in triumph and taking God's people home, but rather he will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place unless you repent.

That is to say, he will take away your right to be called a church. He will extinguish you as a church. Jesus will come and judge you and without love, you will no longer be a church of Jesus Christ.

Hence the description of Jesus back in verse 1. He's the one who walks among the lampstands and here is the threat that if they do not return to their first love, this lampstand will be extinguished.

[16:49] We must not, you see, take Christian love lightly. It is an obligation on us, not an optional extra for ultra-sensitive or ultra-mature Christians.

It is for each one of us and the warning is serious. It is worth thinking about as Christian people. What love do I exercise to God and to other Christians?

Christians. Well, the Ephesians get another gold star in verse 6. Yet this is to your credit. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

We might think that hate is a bad thing, a bad attitude. But in certain situations it's right and good and here Jesus commends the hatred of the Nicolaitans. He himself hates them.

The Nicolaitans we know little about. They occur again in Pergamum. We'll see that next week. And it seems that they are people who did not hold to godly standards. They seem to dismiss the laws of the Old Testament and the Bible generally.

They seem to be people who indulged in immorality and idolatry, licentiousness and free living in a pagan free living society. It seems probably they compromised God's standards in big ways in order to accommodate the standards which are much lower of their society which was pagan.

Reminds us that the purity of the church is crucial. We cannot afford to compromise God's standards in a world which like theirs, ours is also quite pagan and immoral.

Jesus then says, let anyone who has an ear listen to what the spirit is saying to the churches. Words that recollect some of Jesus' own words on earth. When he taught parables, let him who has an ear hear and understand.

But it really refers back to the beginning of the book of Revelation. Verse 3 said, blessed is the person who hears and keeps the words of this book. That's in effect what's being said here.

It's an exhortation to us who hear these words because it says anyone, it doesn't just say the people in Ephesus, let anyone who hears keep these words. In effect is what's being said here.

Urging us, as well as the ancient Ephesians, to obey Jesus' words. And like all seven letters, there is a promise near or at the end.

To everyone who conquers. Not by might, not by ability, not by own works, but rather it's clear through the book of Revelation because it's made clear in the visions that follow in the second half of the book.

The one who conquers is the one who places his or her faith and trust in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. For it's there on the cross that victory is found. He has overcome the world there.

And the one who places his or her faith and trust in him and his death is the one who, like him, also conquers. So this is not telling us you've got to achieve something, but rather reminding us about where we place our faith.

faith, it's in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. For in the cross is victory found. And the promise? I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

[20:20] The tree of life. It's only occurred in one other place in the whole Bible and you have to read a long way back to find it. all the way back to Genesis 2 and 3. The Garden of Eden.

The picture of perfection before anybody sinned in world history. And there in the center of the garden was the tree of life. A tree that people were meant to eat from. But once they'd sinned, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

It was guarded by cherubim with flaming swords so that they could not go back and eat the tree of life. Because sinners can't. God's protecting them.

And protecting that tree. But now at last in the Bible comes the promise that those who place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ can return to that paradise of God and eat of the tree of life.

What a great promise that is. And yet the word tree is an unusual word here. Those who heard the Bible studies in January may remember what the word tree of life is about.

[21:21] Because the word tree is actually talking about dead wood. Which is quite ironic to think of a dead wood tree of life. But it's referring to a particular piece of dead wood I think in the end.

The tree that Jesus was crucified on. For there in his death is found our life. This is a promise of eternal life for those who persevere in faith in Jesus' death.

Not just who start out with that faith. but keep on even under affliction with that same faith. Well let's travel on.

We'll have a look at the map because we could spend forever in Ephesus. It's such an exciting place. But we haven't got time. We've got to move north. 60 kilometres north to Smyrna. There it is.

I've sort of scratched in a little blue mark so you can see where we're heading. But we're heading north. These days it's an hour's drive in a bus. 60 kilometres. Smyrna is a smaller town than Ephesus in the ancient world.

[22:24] Though now it's not. It's one and a quarter million people. It's a very modern city whereas today Ephesus is completely uninhabited. In John's day I guess Smyrna competed with Ephesus for attention.

A sort of Melbourne Sydney type rivalry no doubt. It also had major temples. It won the great honour of being able to build a temple to the Emperor Tiberius. although Ephesus had other temples to other Roman emperors.

And one of Smyrna's great claims to fame is that it was where Homer was born. It was a place of learning and intellect. A place of grand architecture. Like Ephesus I guess as well.

It also had a large amphitheatre. It was a place of great beauty. And one of the features of Smyrna in the ancient world was that it was a town with a very strong allegiance to Rome.

Very strong. There was no unrest. No niggling trying to be independent here. This was a town with very strong allegiance to Rome and the Empire.

[23:28] It's not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. Though it's clear that it became a significant Christian city. Or at least a place of Christian community in the first century and into the second as well.

And we know that by the turn of the first to second centuries it was a place that had its own bishop. Today as I've said it's a town city really of one and a quarter million.

It's quite a beautiful city in a way on the Aegean Sea. One of the reasons it's so beautiful is that it was destroyed in the Greek Turkish War of the 1920s. And it's been almost completely rebuilt since then with lovely wide streets.

But I must say I don't advise you try to drive in on your own. It's murder trying to find the right way into the centre of the city. Well the letter to Smyrna.

Verse 8. To the angel of the church in Smyrna write these are the words of the first and the last. Another description for Jesus also found back in chapter 1.

[24:32] He was dead and he came to life. And like the description of Jesus for Ephesus this description has particular application to Smyrna as we'll see. In fact some say that Smyrna was a resurrected city.

It was destroyed back in about 600 BC and rebuilt in 290 BC. And some think that there was this idea that Smyrna is a resurrected city that's come back to life and maybe that's why these words are chosen.

Although I think there's probably another reason as we'll see. And again words of commendation to this church. I know your affliction, a general term, defined by two things.

Your poverty and the slander against you. This church was poor. Poor materially I think is what's meant.

Probably they're poor materially not because they're Christians who come from the lower classes. It seems consistent that Christian churches of the ancient world combine people from upper and lower classes.

[25:34] Christians. But rather it seems that these Christians are poor because of persecution. They go to apply for a job. It's discovered they're Christian.

The job goes to somebody who's not. It's hard to get a house. Hard to eke out an existence. Maybe like today there's similar sorts of persecution.

Unwillingness to work on a Sunday makes it very hard for some Christians trying to maintain God's standards today. These are Christians who are suffering economically because of their Christian faith.

Very difficult. And yet Jesus says to them you are rich. Not because they've got stacks of money hidden away or an inheritance that's coming from a rich aunt or something. But you are rich spiritually.

Your faith in Christ means you have all you need. Maybe it's talking about the end of time. That at the end of time you will inherit all the wealth that's spiritual and lasts forever. It's probably saying something like Paul's statements to the Philippians.

[26:38] That if he had everything he would count it as loss for the gain of knowing Christ. So these are people who are rich because they've gained Christ. They need nothing else. That is worth far more than the riches of this world.

A reminder to us about how we think about our money and wealth and where our treasure lies. That's the first thing about these Christians. They're poor. The second thing is that they face slander.

Smyrna as I've said was a very fiercely Roman city. Very pro-Roman. It also had a large Jewish population. And in the Roman Empire the Jews were protected by the Roman rules that they did not have to worship the emperor like all the Roman citizens did.

Jews had a special exemption. This created a great clash when Christians and the Christian church in a sense broke away from ancient Judaism and the Jews of the first century.

Christians of course refused to worship the emperor. Perhaps some Christians who were Jews tried to claim the exemption of the Jews. But probably you see this slander is the Jews trying to kick out the Christians and expose them as being infidels or traitors to the Roman Empire.

[27:50] We know from other things written about this time that Christians were often falsely accused of all sorts of things. Some accused them of cannibalism because they were eating the body of the Lord Jesus Christ in their Lord's Supper and communion services.

So some tried to interpret that as cannibalism. Some talked about Christians being incestuous, indulging in incest because they loved each other and love was such an important part of the Christian teaching.

Others were accused of just being traitors or ironically atheists because they refused to bow down to any idol of a God. The truth is, Jesus says, that they are not real Jews.

They claim to be Jews but they're not. Not because they're not really descended from Abraham but because real Jews acknowledge the real Messiah and they don't. And therefore they've lost their right to be called Jews as in the ancient people of God of the Bible.

Indeed, Jesus says they are a synagogue of Satan. Strong words indeed. But remember that Satan literally means the accuser and that's what they're doing.

[29:03] These Jews are accusing Christians falsely, which is exactly what Satan does. And therefore they're declaring their real colors. They are a synagogue, a gathering of Satan followers seeking to accuse falsely Christian people.

life couldn't have been easy for Christians in Smyrna. The opposition they faced was unfair, unjust, harsh, a serious persecution.

And Jesus' words to them are striking. He says firstly, stop fearing. Verse 10. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested and for ten days you will have affliction.

Hardly words of comfort. Don't fear you're about to be thrown into prison. And prisons in the ancient world weren't all that pleasant. They weren't full of all the mod cons and color TVs and things that our modern prisons have.

Indeed they were very harsh places. Many people died in them, were not fed in them, probably ended up being killed in them and there was very rarely any release from them. Hardly words of comfort and yet Jesus says don't fear.

[30:17] But then secondly he says be faithful. The end of verse 10. But notice what he says, be faithful unto death. Hardly words to encourage you and bolster you in the midst of persecution.

Be faithful unto death. Hey hang on a minute Jesus. Can't you rescue us from this situation? Be faithful unto death. Jesus says to them. Don't lose your faith.

Don't let suffering take away your faith. As so often in our world it does. Christians faith is okay until they face a period of trial or suffering or difficulty in their life and then it just seems to evaporate.

Hang on. Keep being faithful. Jesus is saying to these Christian people. They're hardly reassuring words and yet throughout this message to the Smyrnan Christians there is indeed deep comfort.

Deep comfort because this persecution is limited. Ten days. Whether literal or metaphorical. It's a limited period of time. Words of comfort because Jesus says and I will give you the crown of life.

[31:17] Not now the tree of life to eat but now the crown of life. Why the crown? Maybe it's because in the athletics games the victor would wear a crown. So it's a statement of triumph and victory for the person who places faith in Christ.

But maybe also it's because of Smyrna. The emblem of the town was a crown. Much like modern Melbourne isn't it? The reason they had crown as their logo was not because of a casino but because there was a mountain.

Mount Pagos. And around the top of the mountain there was a gold road with temples on it. And it looked like a crown around the mountain. So it became the emblem of the city.

Jesus is saying here that's not the crown that matters. The crown that matters is the crown of life. death. And it's yours if you're faithful even unto death.

But there's more comfort in this letter to the Smyrnans because Jesus is described at the beginning as the first and last, the one who was dead and came to life. The crown of life is real because Jesus died and he rose.

[32:24] He lives. So be faithful unto death and resurrection is real for the followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the model of encouragement for them you see.

But also the letter finishes by saying let anyone who has an ear listen to what the spirit is saying to the churches. The same exhortation but now the difference at the ending. Whoever conquers, not the tree of life, but whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

In the book of Revelation the first death is our physical death. Whether we're killed or when we're old. The second death is the judgment day death. Those who are expelled from God's presence forever.

That's the second death. But Jesus is saying here if you're faithful to the end you will not face the second death. For on the day when Jesus returns you'll be gathered up to life.

And that's a real promise for God's people. Well let me conclude. These letters challenge us to persevere in faith.

[33:27] persevere in faith. We're probably not in the same sort of situation as the Smyrnan and Ephesian Christians facing a real death from Roman persecutors.

But when mum or dad mocks you because of your Christian faith, be faithful. Persevere. Don't give in. When in your job situation you're overlooked for some reason because of Christian faith, be faithful.

Don't compromise. Maybe it'll be that your teachers pick on you because you're a Christian. Because something you write in an English essay will express Christian truth with which they reject.

Be faithful and don't give in. I read a story just this week of an American student at high school who wrote an essay about Jesus Christ when they're asked to write about something that meant something to them.

It was thrown back without a mark because it was about Jesus Christ. Be faithful. Don't give in. Persevere. How easy it would have been for people in Smyrna to give up being Christians to save their lives.

[34:40] There was a great bishop of Smyrna. He was the bishop who knew John in this bishop's early days. This bishop lived to be 86 years old and in the 150s AD he was put to death for his Christian faith in Smyrna.

His words when he died were something like this. For 86 years has my Lord provided all my needs. I will not give up on him now. And he died a faithful death.

And I'm convinced that he was not harmed by the second death but received the promised crown of life. Remember then who the Lord of life is.

The Lord Jesus Christ. And the promises for those who conquer. Promises that are real. Amen. The Lord of life is going to change the Uhr Corpu■■.

The Lord of life it has only got one month and made it suckers. The Lord should dijo Hans G noise in the laughing leaves. Everyone was gonna try the sameROD for you. Yes the Lord would not so the Lord of life it never did not long. So far as PAT its state for the NXT would be what we believe is during for shows how il s' Prosth Ikhin is going to impose the Lord of life.

[35:55] And our Lord of life for the Fish and Peace will continue attacking you. So by the word of Of suffer.