

You Left Your First Love
Revelation 2:1-7

Turn to Revelation 2. The church at Ephesus left its first love, and we need to talk about this. It was serious enough that if they did not correct this, they could no longer be church at all. The Lord would remove their lampstand. But before we get to their first love, we'll talk about some other things.

The Seven Stars who are Angels – The Angels are the Churches (1:20 – 2:1)

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

So, who are these angels? In the messages to the seven churches, the Lord always treats the angel exactly as if the Lord was speaking to the church itself. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus" he says. If we took "the angel" out of that sentence, nothing changes. "To the church in Ephesus, write this." That's how these seven messages are written. Let's go with that.

Jesus the Almighty Lord has the seven stars in his right hand, and they are the angels of the seven churches. But then, Jesus treats the angel as if it was that actual church.

In Rev 1-3, each church has a representing angel. This angel is a heavenly being that embodies the actual church. It has all the characteristics of that particular church. These angels each personify their own church. Jesus tells several of the angels that they, the angels, need to repent. Get your head around *that*, if you can! The angel is the whole church in one being.

In the vision, Jesus holds the seven *stars* in his right hand, and he walks among the seven gold *lampstands*. The *stars* and the *lampstands* are much the same: both are symbols of the church. *Lampstands* represent the *churches*, and *stars* represent *angels*, but the seven *angels* represent the seven different *churches*.

Now, picture Jesus with *eight* stars in his right hand, and walking among *eight* lampstands. And *our* little church, with all its peculiar strengths and weaknesses, is the *eighth* lampstand, and the *eighth* star in his right hand is the angel that embodies *our* church. When there is something wrong going on in *our* church, it's happening to *that* angel.

But here's the thing: the angel that embodies and represents our church, is in the Lord's right hand. That is as safe and honourable a place as we could be. If *our* angel is in his right hand, then *we* are in his right hand.

The stars are in his right hand, and he walks among the lampstands. The churches are in his right hand, they are safe and honoured, and he also walks among the churches, he knows what's going on in each one. That is very good news. Our church, and every church, even the ones the Lord is worried about, are in his right hand, and he walks around among us.

The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

How Did the Ephesian Church Please the Lord?

*I know your deeds your hard work and your perseverance.
I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people;
That you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not;
And you have found them false.
You have persevered;
And have endured troubles for my name;
And have not grown weary...
You have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

This church has two strengths. One, endurance at hard work. Almost all these letters begin, "I know your deeds." That means, "I know what you do." That's the first thing the Lord says here, and usually. "I know what you do."

These people work hard, and they won't quit. I know your hard work, and your perseverance, and you have persevered, and you have endured trouble for my name, and you have not grown toil-weary, labour-weary. This pleases the Lord no end, because he lived like this too.

There is a notion around that if serving the Lord is hard work, we're doing something wrong. Don't believe that. Serving God is can be hard work that goes on and on. I do *not* mean that everything that's hard work is serving the Lord. *Not* everything that's hard work is serving the Lord. But serving the Lord is often hard work that lasts a long time.

Paul in 2 Corinthians speaks often about labour and toil, as well as comfort and joy. This church in Ephesus worked hard for the Lord, and did not quit when others would. This pleased the Lord.

We're not talking here about whether or not people will rest. All of this assumes that of course, God's servants will rest when it is time to rest. Regular rest. But they would not quit. We actually don't do this well. We can't tell the difference between regular rest, which is good, and quitting. So we don't rest at all.

Regular rest is good, quitting is not. These people worked for the Lord, rested, but did not quit.

Their second strength is that they were vigilant about deceivers, and living in God's truth. This comes out a few different ways. "You cannot bear evil doers," those people who want to join the church but they refuse to live in God's ways. "You cannot bear them. Good," says the Lord!

You test those who say they are apostles but are not, and you find out that they are false. "Good for you," says the Lord, "all churches should do that." They were vigilant about deceivers.

And later, "you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Strong words. The Nicolaitans taught that it was okay to attend worship other gods as well as the True God. The Ephesian believers hated what those people did, and the Lord also hates those actions.

The Lord enjoys all this. They were vigilant about God's truth, and calling deceivers what they were. We should take this to heart. We might suspect these people were too strict, not tolerant or patient enough. It is surprising to us that they so careful, and the Lord approved it.

In churches, we tend now to be patient and tolerant of this kind of thing. Ephesus did not tolerate deceivers or false claims to be God's people, and the Lord was pleased with that. They were vigilant about God's truth and about deceivers, and they worked hard for the Lord and kept at it, they kept going.

But the Ephesians Left Their First Love

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

What was their first love? They used to love each other the way Christ loved them. They watched over each other, they carried each other's burdens, they helped those who were struggling, they listened to each other and did what they could to bring comfort and encouragement to each other. They forgave each other and accepted each other.

They used to do these things, and then they stopped. These people guarded themselves against any kind of false brothers or sisters, but they stopped showing kindness and help to weak brothers and sisters. *You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first.*

How do we know this was their first love? Let's consider that. There are two great love commands: to love God, and to love one another. Does the Lord think these people love him? Yes he does. All of their endurance and perseverance and their not quitting shows that.

In particular this line, "you have endured troubles for my name." These people have great devotion to Jesus the Lord. And they hate what the Lord also hates, and that's good too. There's no doubt that they have much loyalty and devotion to the Lord. They have that love.

Whatever love they had, and then lost, it is absolutely essential to being God's people. If they don't start doing these things again, they are actually disqualified from being a church. Christ will come and remove their lampstand. They won't be a church.

Let's remember that Revelation is written by John, who also wrote 1 John. I'm going to read you some lines from 1 John 3-4 about loving one another. You will see why people who do not love one another cannot be a church.

This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.... For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.... We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death... If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.... Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 1 Jn 3:10-11,14-15,17-18; 4:11-12.

And this all comes from Jesus himself: *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

By this will everyone know that you are my disciples. This more than anything else is what makes us LIGHT in the world. More than anything else, this makes us a lampstand, and this is what makes us a star in the Lord's right hand. By this will everyone know that you are my disciples. This is the first love that the Ephesian church once practiced, then they stopped.

I was taught a different view of their first love. I was taught that they left their first love for the Lord. When they first became Christians, they had that eager enthusiasm for Christ that people often have when they first come to Christ. That's what this church had to get back.

This wrong teaching is still around, so let's talk about this. New believers do often have lots of excitement and energy for the Lord, and that is good, wonderful, healthy. That's as it should be.

But that does not work as their first love here. Many places in the NT encourage endurance, perseverance, not quitting, or losing heart. This message to the church in Ephesus does that, Revelation encourages endurance in other places too, Paul writes about it, Hebrews encourages perseverance. Jesus himself said that the one who endures to the end will be saved.

The Lord wants *endurance*. The whole point of endurance is that we keep serving the Lord and living faithfully when we *don't* have that first energy and enthusiasm. I have run 4 or 5 miles many times (although I don't any more). The first half mile feels good, it's easy and fun. But by the last third of the run, I mostly think about finishing.

Imagine the Lord coming beside someone who is 2/3 of the way through a long run, and saying, “you are running well, you have good endurance, your stride is strong. But you don’t have that eagerness and energy that you did in the first half mile. If you don’t get that first enthusiasm back, I will disqualify you from the race.” That makes no sense. That’s not how endurance works, and no Scripture describes loving Christ like that. So let’s lose that for good.

Their first love was their devotion to one another. They watched over each other, they carried each other’s burdens, they helped those who were struggling. They forgave each other’s offences, and they accepted each other as Christ accepted them.

That church had seen quite a bit of counterfeit Christianity: false brothers and sisters, false apostles, and false teaching. They were alert to these problem, and that was good. Don’t make their strength a problem. They watched out for different kinds of error, and the Lord really liked this. It is good when churches are like that. The Lord wants all churches like that.

But they had lost their tenderness and concern for one another, they had lost the ability to forgive and encourage one another. And without that, they will lose everything. They will be disqualified. The Lord will remove their lampstand. This church was winning important battles, and losing an essential battle. And they did not know it.

What if the battle that seems most important is really a distraction from the essential battle? That was true in Ephesus. They had stopped doing the kinds of things they used to do for each other. The Lord knows they remember what those were. They remember that. They just didn’t think it mattered as much as it actually did.

What really matters is this: are we loving one another as Christ loved us? Are we accepting one another as Christ accepts us? Are we paying attention to those among us who are in need?

We are not the Ephesian church. Every week I hear good stories about you doing just such things. I know there are hard stories among us. But there are also good stories. Things we did at first are still happening among us. This Scripture tells us that it’s more important than we thought.

I remember a conversation years ago about a church like the Ephesian church. For years this man had been part of a church in another country. He said this church was strong and determined to be faithful to the Lord. There was opposition to Christianity in that place, they were persecuted, and their faith brought them regular trouble.

They endured troubles for the Lord’s name. Their church was burned down once by their enemies. Did the people stay home that Sunday? No. That Sunday the church people all met in the church parking lot, to pray, and sing songs to the Lord, and read Scripture. They would not quit, and they would not let people think they were quitting.

But, this man said, if anyone in the church was struggling, if anyone showed weakness or fear, the church was hard on that person. They did not allow weakness or fear, you had to be strong and carry on. He told me that North American churches were much more loving than this church.

Something like that was happening in Ephesus. And Jesus told them, “you have fallen. You’re doing well in important things, but you have fallen, and if you don’t start doing those first love things again, you can’t be a church. I will take your lampstand away.”

Our love for one another is what makes us light. We worship Christ, and we love one another. By this will all people know that you are my disciples. That is our light. That’s what makes us a city set on a hill.

I do not think we are the Ephesian church. There is real interest here in taking care of one another. But the end of this message makes clear that what Christ says to the angel at Ephesus, the Spirit says to every church. The Holy Spirit is saying these things to us here, because we all need to know about these things, so we can guard ourselves and know what’s important.

What if the battle that seems most important is actually distracting us from the essential battle? That was happening in Ephesus, a fine strong church that knew and loved the truth.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. To the one who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, for every time your Spirit has led us to be kind to each other, we thank you. For every time you’ve helped us forgive an offense against us, we thank you. For every time you’ve helped us help someone in need, or encourage someone, we thank you. For every time you’ve helped us accept someone whose differences troubled us, we thank you. For every time we’ve given ourself to someone else’s needs before our own needs, we thank you.

None of us do this enough, but we all do this sometimes, and every time we do, it shows that we are born of you, and that your Holy Spirit is active in us. We give you praise that you keep doing your most holy and powerful work in people like us. O Lord, don’t stop. Work in us. Amen.

(response time)

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.