

## **“To Ephesus: Remember to Love Me”**

*Revelation 2:1-7*

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### **Revelations 2:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>*“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

<sup>2</sup>*“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. <sup>3</sup>I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup>Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. <sup>6</sup>Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup>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 in the paradise of God.’”*

### **Introduction**

Today we are studying the first of the seven churches that receive Jesus’ message in Revelations 2 and 3. The seven churches represent all the churches of Jesus Christ- the whole church of Jesus Christ, so that includes ours as well. Two of the seven churches get only commendations from Jesus with no criticism- the church of Smyrna for their suffering and the church of Philadelphia for their faithfulness. One of the churches gets only criticism and no commendations- the church of Laodocia for their lukewarmness. Four of the churches get mixed reviews- church of Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis.

The church of Ephesus receives commendations and criticism, mostly good things except one thing that is wrong which we will talk about. These churches were located in relatively well-known cities in major highways connecting the various Greco-Roman cities in what is today southwestern Turkey. These churches were a series of house churches, and at that time they did not even have the written New Testament scripture. When these letters, which would become part of the New Testament later, were given, the leaders would receive it and explain it to the church so they could apply the commands.

Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the world. One of the four major cities chosen by Caesar in the Roman Empire. It was a very cosmopolitan city- the city’s landmark was the temple of Artemus. One of his symbols was the date palm tree, which is contrasted in verse 7 to the tree of life. The church in Ephesus was planted by Paul in the book of Acts, and it was commended for doctrinal vigilance and endurance, but it was rebuked for forsaking love. It was a church that busily served the world. But, the church members lost their heart and the church had doctrinal discernment but without love. One thing we can learn from this church is that if the heart is not right, whatever you do, whether for Jesus or not, it is not right. We can also examine our own 21<sup>st</sup> century churches, including Covenant Fellowship Church or other home churches we belong to. As the churches are made up of families, and families are made up of individuals, we must also examine our spiritual standards for our family and ourselves and individuals. We must ask ourselves, *am I loving Christ right now?*

## **I. Jesus addresses [1]**

### **A. He guards the church – the angel**

*Rev 1:1-3*

*<sup>1</sup>The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup>who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. <sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.*

The letter is addressed to *the* angel of the church in Ephesus. Most commentators will say this person is either an angelic being or a human leader of the church because the word ‘angel’, both in Greek and in Hebrew, can mean an angelic being or a messenger. I believe that it is not an angelic being here because, in Revelation 1, God gave the message to an angel and an angel gave the message to John so that he could record this. It would be illogical for John to then give it an angelic being that protects the local church.

I believe a better interpretation of that angel is a human messenger who represents the church. Revelations 1:3 says, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy,” which refers to a representative in the church that reads and explains the letter to the congregation. That person is distinguished from the rest of the people who are listening to the message, about whom it says, “blessed are those who hear.”

It is possible that an angelic being guards, the church, because in Daniel there is an angelic being that guards the nation. But whether it is an angelic being or a human representative of the church, the message is the same: Jesus is guarding His church.

### **B. He speaks to the church – the letter**

Because it is a formal letter, it is addressed to one person, who is the representative who may be reading and explaining to the people. So though the letter is addressed to one person, the message is to the whole church. Jesus is speaking to both the physical church in the first century as well as the universal church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **C. He holds the church in his hands - stars**

*Isaiah 49:16*

*Behold, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands;  
Your walls are continually before me.*

*Revelation 1:20*

*As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

Isaiah says God holds his people in the palm of his hands! The problem is that Revelation 1:20 says the seven stars are the angels, which seems to mean the seven stars are the

leaders of the church. Looking carefully, it does not say the seven stars are the *seven* angels, which would mean each star represents each church leader. Instead, it says seven stars are the angels. I believe it is saying is that the seven stars are many angels, or many messengers. Because not only the leader is a messenger, but also every one of us as a congregation member in the body of Christ. Each and every one of us who is a believer is a messenger to the world. He holds the seven stars, the universal church, us, in His hands.

#### **D. He walks among the churches – lampstands**

Revelation 2:1 says “walks among the seven golden lampstands,” while Revelation 1:20 says the seven lampstands are the seven churches. The stars are the congregation and the lampstands are local churches of Jesus Christ. Together, it says He is walking in the midst of us. He understands the affairs of everything in the church and among individuals.

The two verbs ‘hold’ and ‘walk’ are both present active participles in Greek, meaning the action is continual. He is always continuously holding on to His people and continuously walking in the midst of His people. He is always listening, understanding, experiencing what we are going through, and helps us. The Old Testament picture is of a priest in the temple, walking around the lampstand and ensuring that the fire of the lampstand keeps burning. Jesus keeps His church burning for Him, making sure our hearts are on fire for Jesus. He is holding the stars, emphasizing his intimacy with us; He is walking in the midst of lampstands, emphasizing His empowering intimacy with us.

This church was good in terms of making sure the world was not in the Church so that their hearts would keep burning on fire for Christ as Christ is helping them with the Word. As a church, we are called to go into the world, but we are also called to keep the world out of the Church.

## **II. Jesus encourages [2-3]**

If we have the following attributes and characteristics individually and in our churches, this is how Jesus encourages us. We will personalize this lesson, as if we do have these attributes. Revelation 2:2 says, “I know your works”. It does not mean just intellectual knowledge, but an absolute, intimate knowledge. He knows us completely and He intimately knows us- He loves us.

### **A. Jesus knows our labor**

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

The word toil refers to strenuous labor that induces weariness. When you work hard for Christ, even if nobody else watches or encourages, even if you receive criticism for your work, Jesus knows your work.

### **B. Jesus knows our patient endurance**

*I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.*

The word 'toil' in verse two has the same base Greek word as the phrase 'have not grown weary' in verse 3. This means He knows not only your hard work, but also your endurance. The word "endure" is two words in Greek: *hypo*, which means under; and *monē*, which means to remain. Thus, if you have patient endurance, you stayed under hardships and difficulties, you stayed under your calling, you kept on going, you endured. Though it was difficult, you kept going and endured patiently for the name of Christ. You did not forsake your responsibility, and bore the burden of it with determined zeal.

### **C. Jesus knows our inability to bear evil**

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

The church of Ephesus evidently had love for purity. The word 'bear' means 'tolerate' or 'carry', while the word 'evil' carries connotations of harm and corruption. You saw the evil that could have harmed the body of Christ or this world, and you did not bear it.

If you cannot bear evil, it does not mean you are weak or quitting. The same word 'bear' is used in verse 3, "bearing up for my name's sake." Basically, the Ephesians could bear strongly whatever it is for Christ, but they could not bear evil. It was an action of love and holiness, of mercy and justice. This phrase also insinuates that they were able to exercise church discipline as a local church.

### **D. Jesus knows our ability to discern**

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

The church of Ephesus demonstrated its unwillingness to tolerate heresy, understanding the necessity of doctrinal purity by trying and testing these false teachers. The word 'tested' suggests a thorough examination. The Ephesians had a penchant for moral purity with a good balance of unquestioned orthodoxy.

When men think about what kind of woman to look for in a wife, they should look for a wife who likewise is strong and has a penchant for purity, who is able to stay under her calling and persevere in her life, and who is able to bear hardship for Jesus Christ. This passage is table the church of Jesus Christ, which is His bride, so whatever Jesus desires in His church, men should desire in their wives.

Jesus commended the church in Ephesus for their right behavior, way of life, beliefs, and doctrine. This was the church that knew the Word. At CFC, we try to teach

the Word of God in such a way that you love the Word more than anything else you hear. So that, in the sermon you love the explanation of the Word of God more than illustrations or cultural references. Being a Word church is very important, because if we raise a congregation that doesn't want to hear God's Word, we might be raising people who would not go to a church that is pastored by Jesus Christ, because His Word is God's Word. I pray that we will at least be a Word church that knows God's Word.

Though this was a Word church, a church that knew the doctrine of purity and fervent endurance in service to the LORD, they were missing something.

### **III. Jesus rebukes [4]**

#### **A. What happened?**

*Ephesians 1:15*

*For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints.*

As a city, Ephesus claimed to be a metropolis and mother city of the whole Asia. The church could claim by her evangelistic and pastoral concern to be a mother church of the province. The people of the church in Ephesus used to be known for their love, and Paul even wrote this wonderful statement in Ephesians 1:15. But somehow, through the times, they lost the focus for love, the most important thing. Perhaps their purpose became greater than the person. Perhaps they lost their love for Christ and their love for the world. Usually, that happens when you lose your worship to the LORD because of the emphasis on the service. When the worship is weak, ministry becomes powerless.

This church was strong in defending her faith and doctrine. Perhaps the congregation became good debaters but stopped being lovers, caring more about winning the debate than winning the souls and hearts of the people. Perhaps they were busy defending from the world but forgot to influence the world with love. We can lose a debate but we can still win the hearts of people. Sometimes we can win the debate but still lose the hearts of people and that's okay. In a debate, make sure to plant the Word of God and to pray for and love the person, and God can use those words to convert them and transform their hearts. They were not compromising with the world, but not really engaging with the world either.

We must have sharp eyes for wrong, but also big hearts for people. I believe the greatest barrier for evangelism is not lack of technique, but lack of love for souls. The Ephesian church has exchanged the process for the destination, the Christ of Christianity for the how-to of it. Perhaps the how has become the why, substituting performance for the person. We cannot love the process more than the person. We cannot ever love the purpose more than the person. Our relationships must always be vertical before horizontal. We must always put our love for God above whatever we do for God, our worship before our ministry. This church was a busy church, but not a burning church.

#### **B. What is it?**

The phrase “abandoned the love you had at first” in verse 4 literally means, in Greek, “abandoned first love”. First – *proto*; love – *agape*. Does this refer to love for God or love for people? They are the same thing! If you love God, you cannot help but to love people. If you truly want to have a genuine love for people, you cannot have it unless you love God, and God gives you that heart. It is not either-or; it is both-and.

The word “first” can mean chronologically prior or prominent. I believe the latter is the better interpretation, because when Jewish readers heard “first love” they were probably thinking about the first and greatest commandment in both the Old and New Testaments: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and all your strength. This love cannot help but to express itself in your love for others, and this is the second commandment: to love your neighbor as yourself. I believe “first love” means our prominent priority love for Jesus, which becomes the foundation and motivation for everything we do in our lives, for Him and for others.

The Ephesians had abandoned, or neglected, their first love, which implies there is hope. Losing your first love does not mean you are forever doomed. There is hope to regain it if you work on relationship with Jesus Christ so you can have your first love. You must take care of your heart. Jesus desires our love so that He becomes our priority, the foundation, motivation, and essence of everything we do in our lives.

There are some signs of losing your first love. What usually happens is that even though you are doing the right thing in the midst of your calling, you will slowly have a desire to do something else. You will want to have different experiences in life rather than a deeper experience of Jesus Christ. You may become irritated and have regrets, even though you are doing the right thing. You often lose emotions. You can easily blame other people. There is lack of prevailing love over predominant feeling, because we have two natures: sinful nature and Spirit’s nature. When we do not get what our sinful nature desires, we feel miserable. And life is full of all those circumstances and situations that cause us to be miserable. Everything must be perfect for us to just have joy, but life is full of hardships and trials and difficulties.

But there is another nature that He has given to us, which is the Spirit’s nature. That nature rejoices even if we lose everything, even if we face all the hardships and difficulties. That nature rejoices as long as there is Jesus. As long as we have that nature, we have a relationship with Jesus, and He pours His love and grace upon us, so even in the midst of our prevailing fear and misery, there is predominant prevailing joy. And we faithfully stay under hardship because of our love for Christ.

When you lose your first love, you become self-focused, concerned about yourself. You become concerned with only your spiritual life. *My* spiritual life, *my* family, *my* church. This command is not just given to individuals, but also for the corporate love to the Church. You should be concerned about others’ lack of love as much as you are concerned about your love for the LORD, because His name is at stake.

We must keep our hearts burning in our love for Jesus because we have two natures. We are selfish but we have the power of Jesus Christ in us. Remember, Revelation is about war. There are dragons and Satan in the midst of all of these things. There are trials, temptations, hardships, and difficulties. Revelation is about war, and this passage is about love because it starts from the war within our hearts between two natures. Our love for God will overcome and overflow to others by His grace through the Word and through the Holy Spirit.

## IV. Jesus counsels [5-6]

### A. Remember

The Greek word remember means to recall or rehearse. Here, it means to make sure that the memory of the past love is fresh and current again.

When did your Spirit's nature awaken, and when did you start to experience the joy of Jesus Christ? Though many of us were born in different parts of the world, all of us have the same birthplace spiritually: at the foot of the cross. When we heard the Gospel and awakened at the foot of the cross and saw Jesus for the first time, we were born and our spiritual nature was awakened, and we started to experience Jesus Christ. When was that, when you loved Christ the most? Think about things associated with it. Think about the cross, think about what Christ has done, when you were awakened to understand the Gospel and the cross.

Make sure the memory of the past love is fresh and current. I believe that is the key to not being burned out in your spiritual life. Every morning, make sure you are freshly reminded of His grace. And if there is any moment in your life when you loved Christ more than now, you are in need of revival.

### B. Repent

The Greek word for repent is *metanoia*: *meta* – change; *noia* – mind. The Old Testament word for repent means change of direction. They have the same meaning, a change of heart that leads to change of direction to follow Jesus Christ. Change your mind about how you think of Christianity, to have a different perspective that stimulates your Spirit's nature so that you can follow Christ. Repent so that a heart change can take place. What we can do is change our mindset through the Word of God so God will use His Word and the Holy Spirit to change our hearts. Only God can change our hearts. Make sure you repent, His grace will transform your heart in such a way you would want to follow Christ and not run away from Him.

Revelation 2:5 says if you do not repent, He will remove your lampstand. Here, it means He may temporarily stop using you as a witness. It does not mean you will lose your salvation or that He will forsake you forever if you do not repent. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ you can never lose your salvation. Everything you go through in this life is the process of Him changing you so you can become more like Christ and give you more blessings. Losing your lampstand means temporarily not being used, just like the Israelites in the Old Testament. God removes a lampstand from the Israelites so that they would repent. God is not using them in some sense; they go through exile so that they will repent and be restored to serve in Christ again.

Either repent or be removed. The command is a love warning that you can lose the temporary anointing and filling and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, which you can regain if you are to repent of your sins before the LORD. Removing the lampstand means God is going to fulfill His will with or without you. If you are not willing to be used or to repent, God will use someone else. Repent so that you can be used for His purpose and glory. You will be so thankful that you lived a hard and difficult but worthwhile life for

the glory of God. If you repent, God will use every single one of you. Go to Him again and again and again.

### **C. Return**

*1 Corinthians 13:2*

*And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

Revelation 2:5 says to do the works you did at first. This may or may not mean to do different things, but it does mean to do everything you do now with affection, worship, and tenderness like you used to. Repentance and doing the things you did first does not necessarily mean doing more; it could even be doing less. But it is certainly doing it with different motivation and different love, with a different reason and for a different person other than yourself. That leads to radically different results and different destiny. It will expand His kingdom, not yours. 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 are about gifts, but chapter 13 is about love, because without love, we are nothing.

Revelation 2:6 talks about the Nicolaitans, heretical sects within the church that compromised with pagans. They seduced godly people to participate in idolatry and sexual immorality making them think that as long as you are saved you can be involved in those things. The Ephesians were good, guiding them away, but in their hearts, they had lost that first priority love for Jesus Christ. We need to always guard against that. But you can always return as you remember, repent, and return to the LORD.

How do I check my own heart? When I was in junior high youth group, during a time when I was on fire for Jesus, we were challenged to come on Saturdays to serve the church, and my job was stapling Sunday school materials. I was so thankful to do anything for Jesus, because that was the first time I was able to serve the LORD. As a pastor, I sit and meditate and prepare sermons, and I am on my knees praying for the people because I feel an indescribable sense of privilege to be able to feed the LORD's people. When I feel my heart become proud, I ask myself, *will I still be thankful to staple for the LORD?* When my time is done and I lie on my deathbed, I want to be able to say, *what a privilege it was while I was alive, to have the chance to staple for the LORD.*

## **V. Jesus promises [7]**

### **A. Paradise**

The one who conquers can eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Paradise means pleasure garden and this is an allusion to Genesis 1 and 2 where life started in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were exiled because of sin, but going back to paradise represents full restoration and redemption. In paradise, you can to eat from the tree of life.

### **B. The tree of life**

*Genesis 3:23-24*

*<sup>23</sup>Therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. <sup>24</sup>He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.*

When Adam and Eve sinned, they were not only sent out of the Garden of Eden, they were also forbidden to eat from the tree of life. It meant the full feeding, joy, pleasure, intimacy, and fellowship with Christ were forbidden. To be able to eat from the tree in paradise represents is full restoration. He will give us full intimacy and fellowship as He feeds more of Christ into us.

### **C. The one who conquers**

The whole of Revelation is saying to all the believers, tribulation and hardships are coming. As parents, as spiritual leaders, you need to be trained so that you can train others. You need to train your children to be tough and strong, so they can deny their own selfish desires to live for Christ, to stand against the wind, to go against the grain. Ultimately, to die for Christ. We cannot train our children to be weakly successful, just living for themselves. We need to produce strong children at CFC. We need to be trained to train others. We need to learn to be tough, to teach them to be tough.

### **D. An ear that hears**

To be trained, we need to have an ear that hears the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit uses to strengthen and train us. The Book of Revelation has the dragon, the beast, tribulation. Life is a realistic adventure with hardship and difficulties. Though life is not a fairy tale, it has fairy tale ending. The dragon will be defeated, the beast will be defeated, and our hero, the king will come back and He will conquer. We are on the right side. And we will have to fight; He is going to use us to win.

## **Conclusion**

The Ephesian church was great when Paul wrote to Ephesus. The Ephesian church was still good, but had lost the first love, in Revelation. But the Ephesian church does not exist anymore. I believe our church is filled with many works and people who love God, but we can never guarantee that CFC will exist ten years later. I pray that CFC will continue to exist. I pray that He will not remove the lampstand, and the church of Jesus Christ, this church, will be on fire for Jesus. That every individual, every family represented here will be on fire for Jesus. That Jesus will continue to use us. I need to guard my heart. I pray that you will do in yours, you will guard your heart as well.

We idolize happiness so much. If we are not happy, we are not in the right place. But there are many people who, even though they have their dream jobs, are miserable in their jobs. Who, even though they have married their dream spouse, go through difficult times and hardships in their marriages. Who, even though they serve in the church, go through joyless

periods. In this world, you are filled with misery; circumstances and hardships will be difficult. But the command in the Scripture is, “rejoice in the LORD always, and again I say, rejoice!” Paul is bleeding in prison, but he calls us to joy. It was not necessarily joy in his work or joy in his circumstances, but joy because of the LORD. Depending on the condition of our hearts and circumstances through our predominant miseries and hardships in life, something is always wrong. But we can always have joy in Jesus Christ. Biblical joy is not because of the ideal circumstance or optimal calling, but rather because we are serving Him in what He calls us to do, for the one whom we truly love. Therefore we can rejoice in Him, even in our joyless circumstances.