# Recovering your First Love

Dr. Joe Fuiten, September 2019

## Revelation 2:1-7

1*"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: 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4 Yet I hold this against you: You have* ***forsaken your first love****. 5 Remember the height from which 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. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God*.

God gave to John visions of the condition of the churches in that area as well as a vision of events in the future. To the seven churches in that immediate area God gave John specific words of revelation and understanding. In the second and third chapters we have the messages that God wanted sent to those seven churches. We will visit them one by one as we consider the various messages.

These words come from Jesus. As such we seem to have the full text of each message from the Lord himself. These are certainly the last messages from Jesus and they may also be the most complete in that they are not edited versions of the message but the full messages. Further since all the messages as well as the entire revelation were intended to be read by all the churches we can assume the messages have a more universal application than to the specific church alone.

I love the two ways in which Jesus described himself. He holds the seven stars in his hand. According to the last verse of Chapter 1 the seven stars are the “angels” or messengers of the churches.[[1]](#footnote-1) I think he is referring to the Pastors of those churches. What a comfort to know that Jesus holds the leaders of his church in his right hand. It’s his church and we can count on him to work in it. The seven candlesticks are the seven churches. Jesus walks among those churches. He is not a long ways away. Just as he did in ancient times, he is here today and is walking among us.

Jesus was concerned about what was happening in the Church at Ephesus. There is a certain irony here. John was the most recent Pastor at Ephesus, leaving only because of the forced exile. There had been other great ones before him. Priscilla and Aquilla, Apollos, the Apostle Paul, and Timothy were among some of the other big names associated with this Church as Pastors. The Ephesian church had the finest leaders Christianity has ever known. Even so they had a particular issue to deal with.

I sometimes wonder how a church is characterized. If it is by our worst members then we are a bunch of backslidden, drunken, unfaithful louses. If you measure us by our most devout, then this is a phenomenally devoted group of people, the best there are anywhere. Maybe Jesus formed some kind of bell curve or averaging or distribution device to determine the nature of each church.

**If Jesus were to judge the church by you, what would he say about us?** Would we be a witnessing church, or one that never lifted a finger to reach the community? Would we be a generous church or a selfish one? Would we be a church that prays or one that ignores God? Would we love the Word of God, or never crack the covers of the Holy Bible? Do we love the house of God, or do we prefer the beach? Are we looking for an opportunity to be in Church or an excuse to stay away?

On the whole, what does Jesus think of the church? In the case of our Scripture today, Jesus looked at the Ephesian church and made some observations.

## First, Jesus acknowledged their good work.

In verse 2 he said, *“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.”* Isn’t it nice to know that Jesus knows what you do? There are unsung heroes in every church/ You see them helping out in the groups and classes. There are also many you do not see because there work is behind the scenes or in jobs that no one notices. God knows the work that we do and he knows how long we have been doing it. He noted what they did and that they had persevered in it.

When no one says thanks, Jesus does. A lot of what you do for the Lord, no one will ever give you a plaque, a certificate, a pin, or even a thank you. In many cases no one will ever know what you have done. Even so, remember that God knows and he is the one we work for.

**Second, Jesus appreciated their suffering.**

In verse 3 he notes their suffering without getting weary. They had been through persecution and were experiencing one right at the time this was written. In spite of that, they had stuck with it through thick and thin.

**Third, Jesus appreciated their steady adherence to Truth.**

There had been false apostles who had come through town. They had a big exciting story but didn’t have the truth to back it up. In verse 2 Jesus said, “*I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.”*

Jesus appreciated their stand against the unrighteousness of the Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans wanted to mix with the crowd that went to Diana’s temple and thought the Christians were being too old-fashioned with their sexual values. The Nicolaitans were following one of the seven Deacons chosen by the apostles in Acts 6. Hippolytus said,

But Nicolaus has been a cause of the wide-spread combination of these wicked men. He, as one of the seven (that were chosen) for the diaconate, was appointed by the Apostles. (But Nicolaus) departed from correct doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifferency of both life and food. And when the disciples (of Nicolaus) continued to offer insult to the Holy Spirit, John reproved them in the Apocalypse as fornicators and eaters of things offered unto idols.[[2]](#footnote-2)

These Ephesian Church did not go along with the modern trend to accept all sorts of sexual sin into the church. God said he appreciated their stand on that.

The ancient church had all sorts of people who took advantage. In the dicache there is even instruction that visiting prophets should not leave with more money than they came with and if they order a meal for themselves while prophesying they were to be ignored.

## The failure of the Ephesian Church

*Yet I hold this against you: You have* ***forsaken your first love****. 5 Remember the height from which 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 does it mean to leave or forsake your first love?

The picture is of the romance between a man and a woman. Do you remember what that was like in the beginning? I’m presuming that it was longer ago than yesterday. I remember when Linda and I got engaged. She was working at the Springs of Living Water in Chico, California. I was working in a paper bag factory in Beaverton, Oregon. I arranged my work schedule to get down there to see her. By working nights, I got off work at 7 AM on Friday mornings. If I worked Swing shift the next week, I didn’t have to be back until 3 PM on Monday. It gave me 16 extra hours on that weekend. After working all night, I got in my little Fiat convertible at 7 AM Friday morning and drove straight through to Chico. I stayed at the Christian resort where she worked until about midnight Sunday night. I got back in my car and drove straight through to be at work by Monday afternoon. I was in love. Still am!

God equates our relationship with him to that very thing. In Jeremiah 2:1-2 it says, “*The word of the LORD came to me: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: "'I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.”*

Forsaking your first love is not about a feeling. It is not that squishy feeling of the first date or of the first moments of your relationship. Companionship, intimacy, and closeness are the elements of maturing love. There is a desire for God, to know him and to be with him, that fills your heart and thoughts. Ask yourself some questions: Is pleasing God a lot less important to you now than it used to be? Do you pray a lot less?

Are you neglecting the study of the Scripture? Do you miss Church a lot more than you used to? Were you once on fire for God, but now things have grown cold?

## What do I do if this is me?

There are three things mentioned which I have summarized as the three “R’s” of getting right with God and recovering your first love. The three “R’s” are: Remember, Repent, Repeat. *5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first* (Repeat)

**Remember** what it was like to be in love with Jesus. Remember the Joy and Peace

**Repent** that you have allowed the most important being in the Universe to be put on the back burner of your life.

**Repeat** what you used to do. Take time for the Bible. Be alone with God. Pray.

#### **The Church at Smyrna**

#### Revelation 2:8-11

8 *"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death*.

Once again we have a description of Jesus. He is described as the first and the last. That is, Jesus is eternal in both directions. Jesus was not a created being, otherwise he could not be the First. The uncreated nature of Jesus establishes his deity. Further, this is the Jesus who died and rose again. Within this single sentence we have all the essentials of Christianity. As to his deity, Jesus is eternal. As to his humanity, he died and rose again. This is the eternal God in human flesh.

Jesus knows the suffering of this group of Christians. They have been persecuted and are now poor. It might be that their poverty was a result of their persecution or they may have been a lower class movement. In either case, they are now poor.

This group of Christians has been slandered. In those days, terrible accusations were leveled against the Christians. Some charged that they were not loyal to the Caesars, which was partly true. Others said they ate children, a charge that may have originated in the Communion service. Whatever the charge, it was originating in the synagogue. Jewish people were influential in the empire and a recognized religious body. They were merciless in their attacks upon the church. By this time late in the first century, they had actually adopted curses into the regular prayers of the synagogue. The battle lines were drawn and the church was getting it from all sides. The Jews and the pagans double teamed the suffering church.

Jesus distinguishes between those who are ethnically Jewish and those who are true believers in God. Even though they were Jewish in the ethnic sense, Jesus does not claim them as his own in this context. It is not that he has withdrawn his other promises from them, but they are clearly opponents, not friends. Instead of a house of God they have become a synagogue of Satan.

Jesus is warning the Christians of further suffering to come. Given that this reference follows his comments about the Jews, Jesus is warning against further Jewish persecution. However, they should not be afraid. The warning is so they will not believe events have spun out of God’s control. God knows all about it and he has not abandoned them. They are not suffering for any sins. They are suffering for doing right.

The second dimension of that suffering is spiritual. This persecution comes from the devil himself. Their struggle should not be seen as against “flesh and blood” but against principalities and powers. Satan will inspire people to imprison them. Their persecution will not be long lasting, although for some it will mean their deaths. He gives their specific period of trial as ten days.

Christians are urged to be faithful in the midst of suffering. Their death really means etenal life for them.

As a footnote to the history of this city we know that Polycarp eventually pastored the Church here. Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John. Some sixty or seventy years later, when Polycarp was an old man, he was literally torn to shreds and his body burned at this very place. Thousands of people witnessed his death. When they asked him to renounce Jesus, he answered that after all those years of faithfulness from God, how could he now turn his back on him. Polycarp was again urged to renounce the “atheists,” the Roman term for Christians, and thereby salvage his life. What he did was wave his arm toward the thousands in the grandstands, turning it back on them saying, “I renounce the atheists.” With that final, in your face response, he was killed. No doubt the words that his mentor had written about this very city were still burning in his soul as he died, “*He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death*.”

**Pergamum** (Pergamos)

*12"To the angel of the church in* ***Pergamum*** *write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 I know where you live-- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-- where Satan lives.14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. 15 Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*

Pergamum (or Pergamos) was the main city of Mysia. It had such a rich history. Unlike Ephesus, it was not a seaport. Instead, it was located high in the hills, about 15 miles inland. The city was filled with great buildings including a library containing over 200,000 items. The Egyptians, worried their great library at Alexandria might be overshadowed by Pergamum, refused to ship papyrus to Pergamos. In response, these clever people developed a new form of writing material, Pergamena charta, or parchment. Mark Antony, ever the great friend to Cleopatra, gave Pergamos' library to her. Cleopatra had its volumes moved to Alexandria. Into this city of book, the people of “the book” brought the Gospel. A church was established. It is to this church that John writes the Lord’s Revelation.

The descriptive name that Jesus gives to himself here is “Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” We recall from chapter 1 that this sword comes from the mouth of Jesus. Its biblical purpose is to subdue and punish the rebellious kings and nobles. Jesus will take his rightful place on the earth.

*May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron, to carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints. Praise the LORD.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

At the moment, the church at Pergamum was a mixture of faithful and disobedient. The same sword that subdues Satan and his minions might be used against some of these Pergamum people unless they repented of their willful sins. God’s sword will be used. The only question is whether we will be happy to see it put to use or be the victims of it.

Twice Jesus mentions Pergamum as the place where Satan lives. Paganism was everywhere in the ancient world. Almost any city could have such a title given to it. I am not entirely sure why this city was singled out in this way. We know there were three imperial temples, dedicated to the emperors. As a government city, capital of Asia Minor, it was the center of loyalty to the Emperor and the Roman Religion. Ephesus had Diana, but they had the government. It also had the temple of Asklepios (the Greco-Roman god of medicine and healing), and the medical center where the physician Galen worked (c. A. D. 160). There were the more “traditional” temples as well. A temple to Athena was here along with ones to Dionysus and Aphrodite. The temple to Zeus had an altar showing Zeus defeating snake-like giants. There were gods aplenty in this “city of temples”. Most of these temples were located in one area of the city, a grove of trees. Together they were the pride of Pergamum. Although the gods had different names, we know they were all religious fronts for Satan.

In spite of all the competition, these people generally remained true to the Lord’s name. He commends then for not renouncing their faith during the time of the recent persecution. He mentions Antipas, who according to tradition was the Bishop or Pastor of this church. This Pastor had been a faithful witness of the Gospel and had been killed for his efforts. Apparently the Roman strategy was to pick off the leaders. John is in exile and Antipas is dead. In spite of that, the people had remained faithful to God.

After commending them for the good of their lives, he says those scary words in verse 14, “*Nevertheless, I have a few things against you.”* What follows is a listing of two kinds of sins. They are becoming familiar now because they have been mentioned before. Both Peter and Jude mention this category of sin. Jude 11 describes backsliders who "*have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit*." There is a combination of sin and greediness. The common problem with the first century church was dealing with the residue of their old way of life. They were used to eating in the temples. It was the center of their social life. Sexual immorality was commonplace and was even associated with many of the religious temples. In the Old Testament, Balaam told the Moabite leader how to weaken the Israelis by getting them to worship Baal. Indeed, it happened exactly that way:

"*The people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifice of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel*"[[4]](#footnote-4)

The problem was not so much any congregation member, here or there, engaging in sinful practices. That is part of the human condition in every culture and generation. The issue was more likely the toleration of certain levels of leadership acting in this way. There were apparently teachers who were advocating, with some success, for this practice.

Jesus also mentions the Nicolaitans. They were also successfully active in Ephesus leading people back into the temple of Diana and into the sexual practices associated with it. Both Balaam’s error and the Nicolaitans were leading people back into sexual sin and into the old way of life. No doubt, like modern preachers and teachers who do not adhere to biblical standards of morality, they could justify their teaching in some way. They might have fooled some of the people, but they didn’t fool God who here calls them to account.

These teachers of immorality were given a choice. In verse 16 Jesus says, “*Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth*.” Now we learn why Jesus describes himself as the one who has the double-edged sword. He intends to use that sword on those who have become his enemies. If Revelation is about the enemies of God being subdued, then he begins with enemies within his own house.

The hidden manna that Jesus promises to those who overcome is a bit of a mystery. If the context has any implication, Jesus may be offering “hidden manna” of the soul as opposed to the food of the temples. They may miss some social gatherings in the temple, but Jesus will feed them in the new way just as he did with Israel in the wilderness. He might also be offering himself as the reward of the righteous. He himself is the manna that came down from heaven. It might be hidden at the moment, but when they overcome, it will be given to them.

The concept of the white stone with a new name on it is far from certain. There is no scholarly agreement on what it means. Some think it refers to the white pebble of acquittal used in courts of justice in that era. While we don’t know the origins of the concept, we can appreciate that it is good. It is one of the rewards that come to the overcoming person.

###### Thyatira

18 *"To the angel of the church in* ***Thyatira*** *write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.*

The description of Jesus takes us back to chapter one. In Revelation 1:13 he is called the Son of Man, with “*eyes like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace*.” It is almost exactly the same words and clearly the same meaning. The Son of Man is also the Son of God. With these piercing eyes he is able to try the hearts and minds of all the people.

You have to appreciate the people of Thyatira. They were known by the Son of God to be doing the deeds of the Christian life. That’s good. They also showed love and faith. That’s good! They were persistently engaged in the service of the Lord. Not only that, they are doing more now than they were before. They had not left their first love. Instead they grew stronger and stronger in their devotion and service. This sounds like a great success story to me.

Jesus is generally pleased with this group, although he does hold one thing against some of them. In verse 24, Jesus indicates that verses 20-23 was directed at only some within the group, not all of them. Some were doing wrong, but the others were not.

## Jezebel and those who tolerate her

*20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.*

Bible students will recall that Jezebel opposed the true prophets of the Lord and promoted her own false prophets who worshipped idols. Her modern, spiritual namesakes were engaged in religious activities but the results were not godly.

God announces his judgement against Jezebel. She will be cast into a bed, not of pleasure but of suffering. Her children will be killed with death, that is, the second death.

From verse 24 we see that Jezebel may well be a kind of code name for demonic or Satanic things. The hidden knowledge goes under the name “occult” or secret. There is no need to proclaim some hidden or difficult word of God. The Bible is really so simple that the newest Christian can understand the essentials of it. (At the same time, the most profound scholar will not get to the bottom of it!) There were major problems, beginning in John’s lifetime, of people promoting secret knowledge, higher knowledge, or special revelation knowledge. Jesus is not impressed with knowledge, however profound. He is impressed with morality and obedience.

## Earthly Rule by the Overcomers

*24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): 25 Only hold on to what you have until I come. 26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— 27 'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery'-- just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*.

I guess it is ok to “hold the fort”. Jesus said hold on. If we hold on, and overcome the enemy, there is a great reward. Such an overcomer will receive authority over the nations. We presume this is not a reference to any kind of temporal rule this side of the rapture. Even though the church certainly became a great temporal power, the reference may well be to a future time when we will rule and reign with Christ. Especially the reference to an iron scepter suggests this. It is a direct quoting of the second Psalm. In that Psalm the Lord’s king is installed in Jerusalem. *Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters." The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

We know that the one who rules with a rod of iron is Jesus. John himself tells us this in Revelation 19:15-16. The phrase about the iron scepter is again in quotation marks. *Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.*

Those who overcome will have the morning star, a further reference of Jesus. Peter tells us “*And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

1. Rev 1:20 “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.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hippolytus, “The Refutation of All Heresies, Book VII”, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., eds., (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson), Vol. 5, pg. 115. The views of Hippolytus on this subject are very important. He lived between 170 and 236 AD. Not only is he early, but he is the disciple of Irenaeus who was the disciple of Polycarp, who was the disciple of the Apostle John himself. It would be hard to get a more authoritative statement about the Nicolaitans. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalm 149:6-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Num. 25:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 2 Pet 1:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)