

Revelation 2:1 -7

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[0 : 0 0] You have forsaken your first love. These are the solemn and sad words that Jesus directs to the church and to the Christians in Ephesus. What about you? What about us? Have we forsaken our first love? What is your answer to that question? I'm not throwing it out simply as a rhetorical question to hang in the air and then move on, but I direct that question to you this morning as we begin considering the passage that we've read. Have you forsaken your first love?

Now, this statement, this accusation that Jesus directs to the church at Ephesus lies at the heart of the letter that we've read and will be considering this morning. It's at the heart of the letter, but it's not the entire letter, and we are urged in the letter itself to hear or listen to all the contents of the letter. It closes with those words in verse 7, whoever has ears, let them hear. We need to hear, we need to listen to everything that is said, and that's what we're going to try and do this morning.

And we'll order what we intend to say about the letter under the following headings. First of all, we want to consider the one who speaks, the author of the letter, if you wish, or the author of this word directed in the first instance to the church in Ephesus, but also beyond that to all churches, as indeed is stated there in that verse that we've just read in verse 7. So, we want to consider the one who is speaking, but then also move on to the message that he brings, and then consider the action that he urges. Of course, the action that he urges is part of the message, but we'll distinguish them in that way.

Then finally, notice the outcome that he assures. Depending on how we respond to the message, there are outcomes identified and anticipated, and we want to notice what they are.

Now, before we launch into thinking about the letter under those headings, we do need to say just a little about Ephesus as a city. Now, there's much that could be said, but for reasons of time, I want to limit myself to the very core essentials that it's helpful for us to be aware of and to know about, to give us some context to the letter. Ephesus, as with all of the seven churches that we read of in these two chapters, chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, was located in Asia Minor, part of the greater Roman Empire in what is present-day Turkey. It was the most important of the seven cities in terms of its size and scale and commercial significance and was a thriving commercial and trading center. Now, of particular relevance for us to note was that within Ephesus, there was a pervasive presence of both pagan and imperial religion. Imperial religion was also pagan, but more traditional pagan religion and the new kid on the block, as it were, which was imperial religion or the cult to the emperor. You may recall from the book of Acts when Paul was preaching in Ephesus and there was a great hostility towards Paul's message and especially the impact of his message. The crowds gathered shouting, great is Diana or great is Artemis of the Ephesians. And so there was this cult to this goddess, Diana or Artemis. But more recently and almost coinciding or in the decades prior to the writing of this letter, there had also emerged this cult to the emperor, this cult to Caesar, and there were temples dedicated to this deified emperor. That was particularly pernicious because connected with that was a connection with the trade guilds in Ephesus and those who were part of these guilds. And if you wish to be successful in business and commerce, it was necessary or certainly very helpful to be part of them, then that compromised you as you had to participate in this cult to the emperor. So this is the city within which there is this church, the church at Ephesus, to whom Jesus is writing. So let's think about the letter then along the lines that I suggested a few moments ago. First of all, the one who speaks.

[5 : 04] Well, there in verse 1, in the second half of the verse, we read, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand. The author is identifying himself. And the language that he uses is familiar to us because in the previous chapter, in John's vision, we find that same language. And we met and we identified the one who holds the seven stars. And we identified the one who holds the stars as Jesus. He is the one who holds the seven stars, the one who was dead and is now alive forever and ever. So Jesus is the one who is writing to the church in Ephesus. Notice how Jesus introduces what he has to say with this expression, these are the words of. Now this introduction to what he goes on to say is a deliberate use of what sometimes is known as the prophetic formula. You know, in the Old Testament especially, we often find the words of God introduced with an expression along the lines of, this is what God says. And then the prophet goes on to declare this message from God. And what we have here at the beginning of this letter really is a form of that same prophetic introduction where the source of the message is being identified, or in this case, identifying himself as God himself. And the implication is clear, but worth stressing explicitly, when Jesus speaks, God speaks. But also as we consider the one who speaks, notice how in the language that is employed here in verse 1, looking back to or referring back to the vision, the vision is developed in two ways by the slightly differing language that is employed.

So let me just give those two ways in which that happens. In the vision in chapter 1, we're told that in his right hand, Jesus held the seven stars. You know, we see that in verse 16 of chapter 1. That's how he's described, as the one who holds the seven stars. Then in chapter 2 and in verse 1, seemingly the same thing is said, but there is a change in the verb that is employed, though to make things a little bit more difficult to identify in our version, it's actually the same verb that is used in both occasions. But there is a change in verb. So in chapter 1, it simply stated that Jesus has the seven stars. The verb to have is employed. But in chapter 2, another verb is used, and it speaks about Jesus holding the seven stars, where the verb that is being used speaks of holding tightly. The picture is of a tight grip that Jesus holds on the seven stars who represent the seven churches. And what has been stated here by Jesus himself as he introduces himself to the church in

Ephesus, he says, I am the one who holds tightly to his people. I hold my people in a firm grip.

I hold you in a firm grip. I'm not letting you go anytime soon or indeed at all. This is the one who writes, the one who holds his people in a firm and loving grip. But then also in the language there in verse 1, we see a slight development in how Jesus is located, if you wish. In the vision, we're told that Jesus was among the lampstands. And we could then, you know, speculate what that looks like or try to.

But here in chapter 2, it's developed somewhat the picture because here in chapter 2 we read that Jesus is the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands. So not simply among them, but walking among them. And the picture of Jesus walking among the lampstands or churches is a vivid picture. It's a beautiful picture. And perhaps echoes the language of Eden where God is described as walking in the garden. You remember that language from the first chapters of the Bible of God walking in the garden.

[9 : 38] And it's a picture of closeness of a God, of the eternal Son of God, of Jesus who is close to His people and of Jesus who cares for His people. He is walking among the lampstands, walking among His people, among His church, His congregations. But there's one further truth about the one who speaks that I want to highlight. And we find it at the beginning of verse 2. There in verse 2, the verse begins, I know your deeds. Now this is entering into the area of the message, if you wish. But I just want to highlight the first two words there, I know.

Just to ponder, just to pause and dwell on the significance of that, of what Jesus is claiming for Himself. I know. Jesus, in every circumstance, in every moment, knows. He knows His church. He knows every congregation, every fellowship. He knows bon accord inside out. Every detail of our congregational life, every way in which we fall short, every hypocrisy of which we are guilty, every virtue that may be ours, everything is known. I know, says Jesus. I know. He knows every believer. He knows every man, woman, and child. He knows you. That truth alone demands that you take Jesus seriously. That this morning, He declares, He declares, I know. Lots of people claim to know. Somewhat bizarrely,

I think it was yesterday morning, I was kind of writing out the sermon. And as I was writing this part of the sermon, the phone rang. And the phone was just to the side, and I picked up the phone.

And on the phone, there was a familiar friend, I use the word friend rather loosely, from Microsoft Security, claiming to know about multiple viruses infecting my computer. Now, having had a call from this friend on a number of occasions, what I now do, and I recommend this to you if you wish, I just leave the phone off the hook. I walk away, and I just leave the phone off the hook. And that wastes at least a couple of minutes of the gentleman's time. And at least he can't try and con somebody else during those two minutes. Now, the reason I mention this is because even as I put the phone down eventually, it just struck me, well, here's somebody who claims to know. He claims to know about my computer.

He claims to know about the viruses on my computer. But of course, it's a spurious claim. He doesn't know. He doesn't know anything about my computer. He doesn't know anything about me. He doesn't know anywhere about where I surf the way. But Jesus knows. Jesus knows everything. He knows the dark waves upon which you surf. He knows your thoughts. He knows your fears. He knows your doubts. He knows your frustrations. He knows your heart. He knows your soul. Jesus knows. The one who writes knows.

[13 : 23] But we want to move on to the message that He brings. And it's a twofold message. It's a message of commendation, and it's also a message of accusation. And we'll note each in turn. First of all, a message of commendation. I know your deeds. And these deeds, I think, are what follow in the verse, the work that they do. They had in verse 2, I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance. Let's think of their deeds as this work that they are commended for, and maybe describe the work. Well, first of all, we're told that it was hard work. They were diligent in the work that they did. The very word that's employed here in the letter, translated work, your hard work, is a word that is used on other occasions in the New Testament to speak of gospel work. Let me just refer to one occasion when it is used in that way. In 1 Corinthians 3 and in verse 8, Paul is speaking about gospel work, and he describes it in this way, the one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor or work. It's the same word.

For we are fellow workers in God's service, your God's field, God's building. Speaking about gospel work, gospel ministry, gospel endeavor. And I think here too, it's gospel work, gospel endeavor that they are being commended for, and they work hard in the work of the gospel. And Jesus is pleased with this. He commends them for this. The nature of the work is also persevering. I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance. And this is perseverance in the face of hardship and difficulties. That's made clear in verse 3.

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name. Now, this persevering work in the face of hardship is perhaps connected to their resistance to the Nicolaitans in verse 6, where this is kind of introduced somewhat surprisingly, and it doesn't seem to follow the flow. It's almost as if Jesus has remembered this. I'm sure that's not how we are to understand it. And it's somewhat mysterious because actually we don't know much about the Nicolaitans and who they were and what is being referred to here. But it's possible that the Nicolaitans were those within the church who were saying, look, let's not make such a big deal about the cult to the emperor. You know, if we need to participate because, well, that's life, that's just the way it is, well, we can do that. We can still be Christians.

We can still do that and participate in this pagan cult and worship. We don't really mean it. It doesn't really mean anything. Some have suggested that this is what the Nicolaitans were urging.

And those who objected to that, those who resisted that, well, they had to pay a cost for that resistance. And Jesus is commending them for their hard work, for their persevering work, for their discerning work. As we read, they attested those who claimed to be apostles. Maybe these men who claimed to be apostles are the same people who are described as wicked people in the same verse. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claimed to be apostles. Maybe these are one and the same people. Wicked people who claimed to be apostles and brought another gospel to Ephesus.

[17 : 07] Well, they were given short shrift at Ephesus. The people listened to their message and they said, that's another gospel. We have no time for that. We know the true gospel that we were taught and we are holding firm to it. These are enemies from within, but who were resisted by the church, by the believers in Ephesus. And on the basis of these commendations, what can we say about the church at Ephesus? Well, maybe the language we would use is that it was a solid church. We say, oh yes, that's a solid church, a well-established church. By the time that this letter was written, the church at Ephesus had probably existed for some 40 years. It was a strong, well-established church. It was a well-taught church. It was a church marked by sound doctrine and in some measure moral rectitude.

It was the kind of church you would recommend to friends or family moving to Ephesus. You know, you lived somewhere else. I don't know, you lived in Rome and your fellow believer said, oh, work's taking me to Ephesus. He said, oh, well, I've got a good church that you could go to there. This would be a church you would gladly recommend. So there's this message of commendation, but there is also a message of accusation. Now, there's only one accusation, just one thing in which they fall short, though much flows from this one thing. And what is this one thing? Well, we have it there in verse 4. Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first, or as it is often translated, you have forsaken your first love. Now, it's very vivid and evocative language to describe a very sorry and sad state of affairs, but what does it mean? What does Jesus mean when he says to the church at Ephesus, you have forsaken your first love? Who was or what was the Ephesian church's first love? I think we can cut to the chase on this one and simply declare that their first love was Jesus. That's the first love that has been spoken of here. When Priscilla and

Aquila first shared the good news in Ephesus, remember back in Acts, we're told of how the church in Ephesus began, thanks at the beginning to this believing couple, Priscilla and Aquila, when they first shared the good news in Ephesus, when Paul preached day by day in Ephesus. What did they recommend to the good citizens of Ephesus? Well, Jesus, who were the first converts captivated by. In Acts chapter 19, we read of a handful of new disciples. Well, these disciples, who were they captivated by? They were captivated by Jesus. Who did they love because he first loved them? Jesus. Jesus was their first love.

Now, of course, this love that they held for Jesus found expression, was made evident and tangible in their love for one another, in their love for their neighbors and their fellow citizens. But their first love was Jesus. Jesus who loved them and gave himself for them. Now, we're going to think a little bit more about how that love found expression in a moment when we consider the things you did at first, which is the action that they're urged to do. But just bear with me until we get there.

But the solemn accusation is that they had forsaken their first love. They had forsaken Jesus. They were still Christians. They were still engaged in gospel work, but their love had grown cold, to use the very language that Jesus uses when He speaks to His disciples. We have that in Matthew chapter 24. They had forsaken their first love. Well, what about you? What about me? What about us?

[21 : 13] What does this look like? What does this look like? This forsaking our first love? How can we diagnose this reality of a love that has grown cold, of a Savior who has been spurned? I think the answer to that we can find, at least in a measure, as we think about the next thing that we have in the letter, which is the action that Jesus urges. Having commended them, having accused them, He now urges action that they are to take in response. We have that in verse 5, and I suppose also at the beginning of verse 7, verse 7, whoever his ears let him hear. So the first thing is to simply listen, to pay attention, to consider. But then in verse 5, very specifically, there is action urged. What is it?

Well, again, I think it's twofold. It's a twofold task. There's a twofold message of commendation and accusation, but there's also a twofold task that is urged. They are to consider, and they are to repent.

Verse 5, consider how far you have fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first. And I'm taking that sentence, repent and do the things you did at first, as one action, because you can't have repentance without doing. So it's not three things. It's not consider, repent, and do, but it's consider, and repent, and do as one response, one action. So let's think of these two things. First of all, they were to consider. Consider how far you have fallen. Pause, reflect, look back, stop, ponder. Consider how far you have fallen. Look back to when you first embraced Jesus as your Savior. Remember the thrill and the passion and the excitement. Remember how you long to tell others, how you relish Christian fellowship, how you delighted in prayer. But I think we can develop this call to consider, not just in the sense of where we have fallen from, but how far short we are from where we could and should have been. How long have you been a Christian? In that time, how much could you have grown in likeness to Jesus? How much closer could your walk with God be today? How many people could you have led to Christ or shared the good news concerning Jesus with in all the time that you have been a disciple of Jesus? Consider. Consider where you have fallen from. Consider where you could or ought to be in the time that God has given you as one of His own. So consider. But having considered, then what is the second thing that we have to do? Well, repent and do. And as I say, I take this as one thing. There is no repentance, no genuine repentance without doing. The genuineness of our repentance is revealed by what we do. And what does Jesus urge the church at Ephesus, and indeed you and me, what does

He urge us to do? Well, He urges us to do the things you did at first. Notice there in verse 6, consider how far you have fallen, repent and do the things you did at first. Now, that's an intriguing expression, do the things you did at first. What does it mean? What were these things that the believers in Ephesus had done at first? Are we left to just imagine what they might have been? We could. We could say, well, what are the kind of things that people do when they first become Christians? We could do that.

We could go down that route and probably not go so far wrong in coming to a conclusion about what these things were. But I don't think we're left to just imagine. You see, this is a letter directed to a church that we know a considerable amount about. Indeed, we know the origins of this church in Ephesus.

[25 : 26] We know the things that they did at first because we're told in Acts chapter 19. And turn with me to just a couple of verses that we can pick out from Acts chapter 19 that speaks about and describes this church and what it did at first, and the very things that Jesus is urging them to do again.

So, Acts chapter 19, we're just going to pick out three or four verses to get the idea. So, first of all, at the very beginning of the chapter, we're clear that this is the beginning of this work, or very near the beginning. Acts 19, verse 1, while Paulus was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples.

This is as a result of Priscilla and Aquila ministering and witnessing there. There was this small group of believers. This is the very beginning. This is the genesis of the church at Ephesus, just at the very start. So, that much is clear. Then from verse 4 onwards, what do we read? Paul said John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. So, he was calling people to repent. On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. These are people becoming Christians for the first time. When Paul placed his hand on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. So, there had been a few, and now there's a few more. This is the very beginning of the church in Ephesus. And what do we read in verse 9, the second half of verse 9 and verse 10?

And we won't go any further than that, but then draw some conclusions. We read there in the second half of verse 9. Paul took the disciples, this small group of disciples, new believers. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

This is the beginning of the church in Ephesus. Here we have described the things they did at first. At first, they were filled with the Spirit of God. At first, they were hungry for the Word of God. Day by day, they gathered in that hall to listen to what Paul had to say. At first, they were passionate about telling the world the good news from God. Think about it. Here we're told by Luke that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. That's a remarkable statement. This was a huge province with a huge population, and we were told that everybody heard about Jesus. Now, how did that happen? Did it happen because Paul preached every day in this hall of Tyrannus? Well, everybody wasn't there to listen. No, it's because the people who heard and who came to faith went out and told others. That's what they did at first. Filled with the Spirit, hungry for God's Word, passionate to tell others about Jesus. This is what the church at Ephesus looked like at first. This is what they were about doing at first. And what Jesus is saying, but you've forsaken your first love. You've got to go back and do those things that you did at first, that you're not doing anymore. That's what you need to do. So we don't need to speculate.

[28 : 54] about what Jesus is calling them to do. This is what He is calling them to do. It's surely significant that in this letter, Jesus describes Himself as walking among the lampstands.

In every letter, Jesus employs one of the pictures that we have in the vision to describe Himself. In this letter, He describes Himself as the one walking among the lampstands. And what do lampstands do?

What do lamps do? What are they meant to do? Well, they're meant to shine. They're meant to give light. They're meant to pierce and dispel the darkness. And this is what the church at Ephesus did at the beginning. So much so that it almost caused a revolution in Ephesus. Civil disorder because of the gospel being preached. Because the light was spreading into the darkness. And it was messing things up and turning things around. Because the believers loved Jesus. And their light was shining.

And the good news and the beauty of Jesus was being seen as that light was shining. That's what they did at the beginning. But it would seem no longer. 20, 30, 40, 50 years have passed. And it's a very different picture there in the church in Ephesus.

Now, they are in defensive mode. In the face of attack and opposition, they had circled the wagons. They were holding on to what they had. They were hiding their light from the world rather than spreading the light in the world. At the beginning, as God's lampstand, they witnessed to their city in the power of the Holy Spirit. They were fueled by God's Spirit and witnessed to God's love in Jesus.

[30 : 56] And this is what a church that loves Jesus looks like. It shines in the darkness. It witnesses to a lost world in word and deed. What about us? What about our church? What about you?

It's time for us to consider and to repent. But there's a final thing that we find in this letter, and it's the outcome that Jesus assures those to whom He is writing. We find that in verse 5, but also in verse 7, the two outcomes. We've seen that it's a twofold message, a message of commendation, but also of accusation. We've seen that there was a twofold task that was given to the church at Ephesus to consider and to repent. Well, there's also a twofold outcome, or in any case, two possible outcomes contingent on repenting or not repenting.

Let's think, first of all, of the outcome in the event of not repenting. If the church at Ephesus were to fail to repent, if we were to fail to repent, what is it that Jesus warns us of as to the outcome? Well, there we have it in verse 5. Repent and do the things you did at first.

If you do not repent, Jesus contemplates that possibility. He says, if you don't repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. And the language He uses, the tense that He uses is very immediate. It could almost be translated, I am coming to you.

I'm on my way. You see, they're already guilty. They have forsaken their first love. And so, Jesus, who is walking among the lampstands, He's heading to them, as it were, to remove the lampstand if they fail to repent. Now, we're familiar with that language. We sometimes use the language, but what does it mean? What does it mean? What does Jesus mean? What does Jesus anticipate happening when He removes the lampstand? Let's think about our congregation to make it real.

[33 : 10] How would He remove this lampstand? Will we cease to exist? I don't think so. The building will still stand. The services will still take place. 11 o'clock, 6 o'clock, we might tweak that, but, you know, we'll still go about our business as a church. Sermons will still be preached. Sacraments will still be dispensed. The rotas will still be made up and followed, but no light, no witness to an agonizing world, no power from above. You can maybe picture it as a well-maintained and polished lampstand, but the flame no longer burns. That's the outcome, the very solemn outcome that Jesus warns the church in Ephesus all. But there's another outcome, and it's the outcome if we repent. Now, I think even without turning to what Jesus says, it's not unreasonable to say that the outcome, if we do repent, is the reverse of what I've just described. We will shine more brightly. We will witness to that same agonizing world in the power of the Holy Spirit, and men and women and boys and girls will hear and believe and fall in love with Jesus, just like happened at the beginning in

Ephesus. That's what will happen if we do repent. But there's also what is stated explicitly in the letter, there in verse 7, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to the one who is victorious, to the one who overcomes, to the one who considers and repents.

I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. What is promised to those who overcome? What is promised to those who consider and repent and do the things they did at first? Life is promised, eternal life, friendship with God in the garden of God.

And as I read this very evocative language and the outcome that is anticipated or promised by Jesus, I wonder, is it fair to detect a recurring picture when we think of how the letter begins and how the letter ends? The letter begins by Jesus describing Himself as walking among the lampstands, walking among the churches, a picture of closeness and care and intimacy. And we suggested that there was maybe an echo there of what we read in Genesis of God walking in the garden alongside and with Adam and Eve.

And to those who overcome, to those who repent, to those who are victorious, there is the promised prospect of paradise, walking with God in the garden of God. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Are we listening? Will you repent and do the things you did at first?

[36 : 25] Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Jesus. We thank You that in Jesus we have one who knows, who knows the darkest recesses of our soul, who knows who we are, who knows how far we have fallen.

And we pray that we would be enabled to respond to the message that Jesus brings to us, that we would consider, that we would honestly and carefully ponder on where we are as Your people, that we would reflect on and seek to measure our love for Jesus, and that You would help us. If we have indeed forsaken Him in one way or another, or perhaps in many ways, that we would acknowledge that and repent of it, that we would return to where we once were. Indeed, that You would take us closer to Yourself than we have ever been. And help us, as Your people, to be lamps that shine brightly, that in the power of Your Spirit we would shine in a dark world. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.