

REV. 2:1-7. LOSING YOUR FIRST LOVE (CHURCH AT EPHEBUS)

BACKGROUND.

About things as they are = letters to 7 churches in Asia Minor, specifically western Turkey. Why did Xt choose these particular churches? Situations they find themselves in, problems face, are **applicable at all times** and places to local churches in a corporate way, and individual Xtians, in walks with Xt. (Maybe prophetic types of prophetic stages in church history.)

Ephesus was Paul's headqtrs for 3rd missionary journey. Port city. Became the **center of evangelization** for entire region, known as Asia Minor. A church that was **extremely well taught**. (Acts 19 = Paul taught there every day for 2 1/2 yrs. Timothy there a long time. Apostle John taught there, too.)

End of 1st century, 40 A.D., 10 yrs after Xt 1st brought message to the city.

Have you ever been in a relationship where it started out so exciting, you could hardly wait to see that special person. To talk with him or her. You loved spending as much time together as possible, even at the sake of cancelling things that once seemed more important.

Others might look on and think you were obsessed! You were. Your center of the universe was this person. Your world revolved around him and you loved everything about him. He could do no wrong.

But then something happened. You lost you love for this person you thought you couldn't live without. Not overnight but slowly, almost without realizing it. You started finding fault in this perfect being. Your affections waned. Distractions crept in. You wanted to be somewhere else when you were with this person. Maybe you didn't hate him, you just didn't love him anymore. The "feelings" just weren't there.

And the worst part was, you really didn't know why.

Most of us, if not all of us, have experienced these feelings at some time in our lives. Sadly, many of us have had a similar experience in our relationship with Christ. And the longer we're Christians, the more like this is to be true at some point in our walk.

This was true of the Church at Ephesus.

If you're here tonight and don't have personal relat. with Xt., understand this: a **RELAT. WITH XT IS A PARADOX**. What sounds negative is and it isn't at the same time. Yes, this is awful to say our relat. can fade and we can be lonely in a way far worse than before we ever knew Xt, because now we've experienced a love that no person can match.

But, at the same time, coming to the point of realizing what we've lost, usually drives us back to Him, running to His outstretched, open arms.

And Christ never leaves us. It's us who walks away. And He's always waiting to accept us back when we decide to return. There is no divorce in our relat. with Xt. (*"Nothing can separate us from the love of Xt."* Rom. 8:37-39.)

So in this sense, to think the God who created the Universe wants a personal relat. with each of us, is a very positive, almost unbelievable thing.

Read 2:1- (7 stars and lampstands explained in previous verse.) What follows in Vs 2-3 is a commendation. Some **good news and some bad**. Quite a good report from Xt. Points out that they'd been **consistently active** in their service to him. "I know your deeds and toil, not grown weary, twice he mentions perseverance, steadfastness with which they hung in there—despite persecution. That's good! Very good.

Also commends them for **doctrinal purity**. Conveying message of the truth. "Didn't endure evil men. Put to the test those calling themselves apostles, and they're not. You found them to be false. After apostles died, Church in Ephesus sustained wave after wave of false teachers. Each time, they sent them packing. That's good!

But now for the bad news. Something had happened during intervening 40 yrs. Xt says, "I have this against you, that you've **left your first love**." I don't think there's any ambiguity about what He's referring to. Not "what" but "who" he's talking about. That's Xt Himself. What Paul calls in 2 Cor. 11:3, the "purity and simplicity of devotion to Xt." ("I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's coming, your mind may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Xt.")

What a **terrific irony**. These blvrs, although their service had been consistent, somehow they'd evidently forgotten who they were serving and why. Although these people knew and used the truth—smell a false apostle a

mile away—somehow the truth had become more of an abstraction, a **philosophy to be used than a person to be loved and cherished.**

Consider the language Xt uses, "that you've lost your first love. Often find God speaking of Himself to O.T. prophets this way. As a lover, a bridegroom of the people. See in the rest of *2 Cor. 3:17*..."betrothed you to one, namely to Xt..."

Image of marriage, in which wife faithful for yrs, through all problems, never unfaithful, never gone out on the other. But somehow, now there is distance in the relationship. What a common discovery that is. Here about all the time today, when after a few yrs, the whole reason for the marriage has somehow grown cold. Even in a Xtian marriage, it's possible, perhaps more common than we'd like to admit, to function along side by side and fail to communicate with each other in a way that builds greater intimacy.

In a similar way, in my relat. with Gd, I have to admit that there have been times when I've functioned along doing God's work, but hardly ever really communicated with him. Somehow, God then becomes more of an afterthought, an abstraction than a friend. (Impersonal, intangible, invisible.) And Christianity becomes an argument to win, not personal relat. to share and develop.

This **distancing from God that Xt describes, is the special danger of the established Xtian.** Person who's been a Xtian for awhile. The foundational questions about God and your relat. with Him have been answered. Pressing problems in your life that precipitated crisis, and may have had a lot to do with coming to Xt, have been resolved. You have a very respectable level of involvement in Xtian fellowship, ministry. You function along doing what you're supposed to or are asked to do, but you do it in your own strength not by depending on God.

But this level of maturity is a very dangerous place to be. It's oh so easy to very slowly, subtly become smug. Self-sufficient. Opposite of what Xt calls in the Sermon on the Mount who are "poor in spirit." Begins with "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit," who know their state of spiritual depravity. Who are completely inadequate spiritually apart from God. That attitude can go away when hit level of maturity.

Symptoms show up gradually, insidiously. That's the whole thing about this problem *Illus*: Like the difference between a slow leak and a blow out. Know immediately when have a blow out. But don't notice slow leak until

tire's virtually flat. Same in spiritual sense. You don't know there's a problem until you've drifted a long way from the Lord.

Not an intentional, conscious decision you make to stop walking with Xt. Rather, it settles in on you over a period of time. Usually, don't really notice you've got this condition, until it's in advanced stages. You don't wake up one day and say, "I'm setting out to lose my love for Xt." Just the opposite is true. You can be so busy working for Xt, you forget to involve Him, to get to know Him.

(Or this illus? *raft on the lake*. The slow rocking of the waves lull you to sleep. Wake up, and see you've drifted far out. Panic and fiercely try to paddle back to safety near the shore.)

READ Excerpt from "Abide in Christ." Andrew Murray.

"You have complained of disappointment: as time went on, your expectations were not realized. The blessings you once enjoyed were lost; the love and joy of your first meeting with your Saviour, instead of deepening, have become faint and feeble. **And often you have wondered what the reason could be**, that with such a Saviour so mighty and so loving, your experience of salvation should not have been a fuller one.

The answer is very simple. You wandered from Him (= lost your first love). The blessings He bestows are all connected with His "Come to Me," and are only to be enjoyed in close fellowship with Himself. You either did not fully understand, or did not rightly remember, that the call meant, "Come to me to stay with me." And yet this was in very deed His object and purpose when first He called you to Himself.

It was not to refresh you for a few short hours after your conversion with the joy of His love and deliverance, and then to send you forth to wander in sadness and sin. He had destined you to something better than a short-lived blessedness, to be enjoyed only in times of special earnestness and prayer, and then to pass away, as you had to return to those duties in which far the greater part of life has to be spent. No indeed.

He had prepared for you an abiding dwelling with Himself, where your whole life and every moment of it might be spent, where the work of your daily life might be done, and where all the while you might be enjoying unbroken communion with Himself."

Is this the condition of your spiritual life? Not that we'd ever admit to anyone else, even self.

There are FOUR KEY SYMPTOMS to look for:

- 1. Repulsed by anything more than short, succinct prayer.** Prayer is right and good, but let's not get carried away.
- 2. Resentment or suspicion toward Xtns who really get excited about God.** (Ex: new Xtn, "It's so great to know God. Grace!..." You think, "Oh, you'll grow out of that." Never say it, but think, "Would you get off it." Or toward an excited older Xtn, "He's probably faking it.")
- 3. 'Chronically' begin to view mtgs, ministry responsibilities, as distasteful obligations.** Duties that I have to perform. (Ex: Martyr attitude. "Someone has to do it. Pat ourselves on the back in twisted, egotistical way.) Point is that it is a chronic problem. Everyone feels that way from time to time.
- 4. 'Chronically' complain about the bad circumstances and burned out feeling.** Too self-righteous to admit to anyone else. Just complain to myself.

These problems, if allowed to go on, **lead to more serious symptoms.**

DOUBT. If unchecked, because no recent experiential verification of your faith in Xt, start doubting, "Maybe this isn't true after all. Maybe God isn't that involved and doesn't have a unique plan for me." Doubt becomes more persistent and bigger as time goes on.

INCREASED VULNERABILITY TO TEMPTATION. There's a void, a vacuum in everyone' life. God created this to be filled by Himself, but if it isn't , it will cry out to be filled by something. We may notice temptations that never grabbed you before, suddenly are able to arrest your attention. We're pulled to other stimulations to fill that void.

Turn to: old and unhealthy relationships, bar scene, spending extra time at your job (really insane to do this!), hours playing video games or watching movies. Whatever it takes to keep busy.

WITHDRAW FROM PERSONAL MINISTRY AND FELLOWSHIP, because we feel like a complete hypocrite. ("How can I show other people the way, when I'm completely lost myself? What business do I have trying to carry on vital Xtn relat. when I don't have any experience in my own life?")

It can come to this. It has in my life before. Ashamed to admit it...

Understood. Believed—mentally. But in terms of ongoing vital relat with Xt, it wasn't there.

Some people withdraw because they refuse to admit there's a problem between them and God. Instead they rationalize and say, "I'm doing all the right things. I'm just going to too many meetings. I need some time off for myself.

Or maybe you shove down your bad feelings until, like a pressure cooker, you can't hold back anymore and you explode on the people around you.

Whatever your reaction, the end result is the same. We drift farther from God. It usually takes a friend to throw us a lifeline and pull us out of our pit of despair.

This was the condition in Ephesus. Slowly developed over a period of 40 yrs. Had gotten for them, and can for us, so serious that Xt warns them in vs 5 at end—"or else I will come to you and remove your lampstand out of it's place unless you repent." This refers not to loss of salvation, but to loss of effective witness for JC in world.

In a fellowship like ours, very well taught, activistic. Guess that even some of us in this room, could be described in some stage of condition Xt describes here. Maybe just beginning to lose the vitality of your walk. Even if not ourselves, certainly know people who are.

SOLUTION Xt gives in Vs 5: very important for us. His prescription for this disease. Doesn't say, "Forget everything you've learned and forget serving Me." Rather, suggests something, that if followed, will restart and rebuild their relat. with him.

HE GIVES 3 STEPS, IN ORDER, W/ 3 KEY WORDS, "REMEMBER, REPENT, DO."

Order needs to be followed.

1. "REMEMBER THEREFORE, WHERE YOU HAVE FALLEN." Right place to start. Sit down. Think about times in your Xtn life, when your walk with Xt was vital. **Not necessarily when "circumstances" in your life were perfect.** Isn't it true that when we're doing well spiritually it often has no relat. to what our circumstances are like. In many cases the times we were most vital were times when circumstances were bad. Why is that? Because we were most aware of our inadequacy apart from personal dependence on Xt. (2 Cor. 11:9-10. "My grace is sufficient...")

So he says go back remember, not the circumstances, but the times when you were excited about having a personal relat. with Xt. When the idea of having the privilege of praying to God and knowing that he was listening was fantastic. When prospect of learning what the Word had to say was exciting. Remember the first experiences of serving Xt were thrilling. Sharing love for Xt was exhilarating. (Theology may have been off but love for Xt burned.)

You prayed and were excited to think the God of the universe was listening. You could still feel unspeakable gratitude for being taken out of your lostness. You could feel the security of finding the one thing that filled the void in your life. Your search for happiness and wholeness had finally ended. You had great joy in sharing your new relat. with other Xtians, people who shared the same treasure you did. (Ex: going up to Martha with info. on letters to Russia.)

2. REPENT. The desire to change must transfer to a willful decision with action. You **change your mind and heart**, go in a new direction. In this case, it requires a decision on your part to go back and rekindle the love relationship you used to have with Xt.

Decision that must be made in spite of feelings such as: feel guilty and under accusation so much that don't feel God would ever allow us to come back. (Feel, "I need to get back into walk with God." Voice = Who are you kidding?! You think He'll take you back. You're not going to change. You've tried before.")

Fact that you felt convicted about returning, was from Xt. Doesn't matter how long you've been struggling—6 mos., 2 yrs, 5 yrs. Either God's word is true and I believe it, or it isn't and I reject it. Just don't stay in no-man's land, wandering in the desert.

3. DO THE DEED'S THAT YOU DID AT FIRST.

Referring to 3 things:

1. RECULTIVATE YOUR APPRECIATION OF GOD'S LOVE FOR YOU AND HIS FAITHFULNESS. Problem of losing first love preceded by losing appreciation of God's love for you. (*Eph. 4:32*—love God and others because God first loved us.) For person in this state, must try recultivating appreciation of God's love for you.

Remember what your life was like BEFORE you came to Xt. Wasn't that the very reason you turned to Him in the first place? Isn't it amazing how quickly we lose our gratitude for what He's saved us from.

Illus: Israelites after came out of Egypt. Wasn't very long before they said, "Oho Egypt. It was so great." If that's true, why did you scream at God, "Get me out of here." Think about what your life was like before Xt rescued you. What Xt has done in your life as a Xtian. The problems he's overcome.

Practice expressing thanks to God IN THE PRESENT > (Phil 4:6, "Be anxious for nothing...") precursor to this state is we've lost all sense of gratitude to God. What was initially a great privilege, now assumed and expected. Take for granted the judgment due us for our sin, paid for by Xt. Doesn't even matter any more. No big deal. "What matters is—my car broke down. My job is unsure. I might fail this class. I don't have a boyfriend."

Amazing the sheer volume of NT letters devoted to expressing thanks to God. We need to develop this habit, cultivate gratitude. Must practice it to begin with. Like a spoiled child, don't learn thanks overnight.

Parable about harlot crying all over his feet and dried with her hair. Pharisee grossed out. How uncool. Xt said, "He who is forgiven much, loves much. Those who realize how much they've been forgiven, spontaneously forgive.

2. REBUILD YOUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH, through means God's provided. **MOG**. Must practice all of them to work in your life. Do you pray consistently? In word? Sharing love? Balanced diet daily. Consistent exercise.

3. PRESS ON. Are you afraid? It's OK to be scared. Just don't let it direct your life. Stepping out in faith. Paul stepped out often in "fear and trembling." (Phil. 2:12,13.) He always asked his Xtian friends to pray for him. What point is God pressing home for you to deal with? Where is He desiring for you to depend on Him and try out new ground? (New relat., area of service, saying no to an area of selfish indulgence?)

What if someone asked, **what constitutes the next step of faith** in your life? Must keep determining to take the next step. That's what keeps us on track with God. The Xtian life is always moving—forward or backward, never standing still.

Probably the surest SIGN OF A REKINDLED LOVE for Xt, is a desire to share that love with others. We actually hurt for the lost, for people who don't know about Xt. We have a burden to reach people with His love. We want to share it with them through our actions. We want to tell them with our words. Our greatest joy comes from introducing people to the love of God, and to teaching them His truths once they accept His love.

What is your burden? What is your joy? Where is your love for Christ taking you?