

The Lord's Word to His Church: Ephesus

In the traditional, longstanding church calendar going way back, even before the Middle Ages, tomorrow, August 24th, was always celebrated as Saint Bartholomew's Day, Saint Bartholomew's Day.

That, in itself, is not particularly notable, however. On Saint Bartholomew's Day, August 24th, 1572, the French Protestants were targeted by the Roman Catholic Church for assassination. It was the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. It was followed by a wave of Catholic mob violence that resulted in the death of 3,000 protestants. That historically makes Saint Bartholomew's Day significant.

But on August 24th, 1662, 90 years later, again, Saint Bartholomew's Day, a remarkable and significant event happened in England: 2,000 faithful English Puritan pastors were permanently ejected from their churches by the national government. It was called the Act of Uniformity, and the idea was to silence all those who were preaching something other than the heresies of the time. The Act of Uniformity dispossessed those 2,000 Puritan pastors of their pulpits, and as a result, silenced the vast majority of England's evangelical preachers. It was called the Great Ejection, and it was no isolated event, and it had far more than a temporary significance. It was, in fact, perhaps the greatest spiritual disaster in English history. It is such a disaster that it is the dividing point in the history of England spiritually. It is like B.C. and A.D.

Matthew Mead, one of the Puritans, said, "This fatal day deserves to be written in black letters in England's calendar." It was said that it was the greatest spiritual disaster ever in England. It was led by apostate leaders and constituted essentially a wholesale condemnation of the Bible, the gospel, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our dear friend Iain Murray wrote, "After the silencing of the 2,000 came an age of rationalism, of coldness in the pulpit, and indifference in the pew: an age of scepticism and worldliness that went far to reducing national religion to a mere parody of Christianity."

In 1852, J. B. Marsden wrote, "As proofs of God's displeasure, a long, unbroken course of disasters began, and within five years, London was laid waste twice." He and others saw these disasters as the judgment of God for the Great Ejection.

The first disaster – remember the ejection was in 1662 – the first disaster hit full force in 1665 three years later. It was a plague that killed 100,000 people, a fourth of the population of London, and it was basically transmitted through the bite of a rat flea. Historians say the city was a wash in dead bodies and a wash in sewage. Within a year, it was followed by the 1666 London fire that consumed the homes of 70,000 to 80,000 people, and burned to the ground 90 churches.

Marsden, again, writing in 1852 said, "Other calamities ensued more lasting and far more terrible. Religion was almost extinguish. The lamp of God went out." There followed, in England, a culture of coldness, a culture of barrenness.

J.C. Ryle, who has enriched us so greatly with his writings, says, "The Great Ejection was an injury to the cause of true religion in England, which will probably never be repaired."

The next 25 years after the Great Ejection featured one long record of attempts to silence the now scattered Puritan preachers. For 25 years, they chased them wherever they went and endeavoured to shut their mouths. Preaching the truth of God became a crime, a crime. It's probably true that England has never recovered.

In the gospel of John, chapter 3 and verse 20, we read, "For everyone who does evil hates the Light. Everyone who does evil hates the Light."

I don't know exactly where we are in American history. I don't know if there's a great ejection coming down the road. I don't know when the truth of God proclaimed will become a crime. I do know there are a couple of bills before our national bodies to make saying anything against abortion or anything against any kind of sexual behaviour a crime. But I do know that there is a rapidly increasing hostility toward the truth. This is a generation committed to doing evil at breakneck speed; and everyone who does evil hates

the Light. So I think sooner or later, we face increasing hostility from the rapidly exploding and dominating paganism.

Sadly, not only were church buildings burned in England subsequent to the Great Ejection, but the church itself, as I said, seemed never to recover – which then poses the question: “What’s going to happen to us when the hostility reaches that level, if it does?” Are we going to follow that history? I certainly hope not. The church has always been an island in a sea of paganism; it was in its very beginning.

The highest ambition of the faithful servant of the Lord William Tyndale, 1494 to 1536, calls out to us. This is what Tyndale said: “I call God to record against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus, to give a reckoning of our doings, that I never altered one syllable of God’s Word against my conscience, nor would this day, if all that is in the earth, whether it be pleasure, honour, or riches, might be given to me.” William Tyndale. Cost him his life. He was killed for the truth, the crime of proclaiming the truth, the crime of translating Scripture. This is the same world in the hands of the same devil in the same darkness, compelled to the same misdeeds, wickedness, unrighteousness, and iniquity.

It’s a new day in some ways for the church. In our country, anyway, being a Christian is not a crime. I suppose we never imagined it would be. We could basically preach anything in the past. How long that will be allowed, I’m not sure. But in order for us to see clearly what the Lord asks of us in the coming days, I want you to look at Revelation 2.

In Revelation 2 and 3, we have seven letters written to seven churches. They’re embedded inside the marvellous book of Revelation. Starting in chapter 2 and running to the end of chapter 3 are these seven letters. They are to seven churches. If you go to chapter 1, verse 11, they’re listed: Ephesus, and Smyrna, and Pergamum, and Thyatira, and Sardis, and Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Those are all cities in Asia Minor, which would be modern Turkey – cities in Asia Minor. In fact, in that order, that’s the postal route to go through the whole country, stopping at the regional postal centres.

John, you remember, is on the Island of Patmos – chapter 1, verse 9. He’s on the Island of Patmos because the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus is a crime. He’s there for the crime of preaching the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, and he has been sent to a rock in the Aegean Sea that is a prison colony, in his 90s, to break rocks. And when he gets there, the Lord gives to him the amazing visions of the book of Revelation.

The opening vision, which we looked at last Sunday night, is a vision of Christ moving in His church. In verse 12, John hears a voice, he turns around, and he looks in this vision and he sees seven golden lampstands, which verse 20 says represent the seven churches. And then there are also seven stars in the right hand of the Lord that he sees among the churches, and they are the seven messengers – the seven pastors most likely – of those seven churches, who have come to Patmos. And John will receive the book of Revelation, record the book of Revelation, copy it six more times, hand one to each of those seven men to take back to their various churches, with a letter to each church embedded in the book.

As we look at these seven letters from the Lord, who is described here as, in the vision, “like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash.” That’s His priestly appearance. “His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow.” That is His wisdom, His glory. “His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze.” That is His omniscience. And in response to what He sees, He judges. “His voice – ” that’s His word, “ – like the sound of many waters. And in His hand He holds these seven ministers – ” these seven pastors, “ – and out of His mouth come a sharp two-edged sword to defend His church. And His face is like the sun shining in its strength.”

This is a glorious picture of Christ. It’s so overwhelming that John falls over like a dead man. The Lord says, “Get up and write. The seven golden lampstands represent the church, the seven messengers represent the leaders of the church – the seven stars – and I’m going to give seven letters.” These are actual churches in actual towns. This is not some kind of look at history, this is simply seven actual churches in seven places in Asia Minor. But they are like churches throughout all of history. There are always going to be churches like these churches.

Asia Minor is pagan. They are, again, “islands in a sea of paganism.” As you read through the seven letters, you realise that they’re suffering. John is suffering. Back in chapter 1, verse 9, he calls himself a “fellow partaker in the tribulation.” He’s going through trouble, that’s why he’s an exile. These are churches that experience tribulation, persecution, the encroachment of worldliness: false teachers, false

doctrine, compromise, coldness, indifference. These are churches like churches throughout all of church history.

Two of them are faithful, two of them: the church of Smyrna and the church of Philadelphia. The letters to them bring up no issues, they're just commended. Five of them are in severe danger: Ephesus, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea. Our Lord speaks to each of these churches, confronting the incipient danger that is creeping into the churches from the pagan culture in which they sit. These are so instructive for us.

There is a kind of sequence to them as well – we'll see that as we go. But keep in mind, these are real churches, historic churches in actual cities made up of actual believers. But they are symptomatic and emblematic of churches perennially throughout history. Some of them are just uniquely good and sound and faithful, but that's the exception. Most of them are a mixture of good and evil. And as we go, as they move away from Ephesus, they seem to go in a descending way; they get worse. We learn the dangers that we face in a hostile world.

Let's read about the first one, the opening of chapter 2, verses 1 to 7: "To the angel – " or the *aggelos*: the messenger, the pastor, " – of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this." Who is that? That's the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man pictured in the vision in chapter 1. The Lord is the speaker. It is Him speaking to the church.

In the second letter, the one who speaks is "the first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life." Again, it's the Lord. The next letter, to Pergamos, in chapter 2, verse 12: "The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this." The next letter to Thyatira, verse 18: "The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this." And in chapter 3, "To the messenger of Sardis: The one who has the seven Spirits of God, the seven stars, says this." And to Philadelphia in 3:7, "The one who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens." That, too, used to describe Christ earlier in chapter 1. To the church in Laodicea in 3:14, "The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the beginning – " the *prototokos* " – of the creation of God." That's how Christ is described in the early part of chapter 1. In each case, Christ is speaking to His church.

So we said last week, chapter 1 is Christ working in His church, the work of Christ in His church. Here is the word of Christ to His church. Now, this is church in Ephesus, in Ephesus. Some of you may have had the opportunity to go to what is now in Turkey called Kusadasi, which is ancient Ephesus, and the ruins are still incredibly remarkable there in that city. It is one of the great ruins really anywhere on the planet; amazing experience to be there.

The church at Ephesus is spiritually strong. The church at Ephesus is founded well, taught by the best possible leaders, the best possible preachers and teachers. Let me give you a little background. Likely, it was founded by Aquila and Priscilla, who in the 18th chapter of Acts, were left there by the apostle Paul. They may have been the original folks who got the church going.

Later in the 18th chapter, we learn that another man came and influenced that church, and his name was Apollos. He came there from Alexandria and he was mighty in the Scriptures and the Old Testament. But he only knew the baptism of John the Baptist, so Aquila and Priscilla taught him the gospel of Jesus Christ. He left a group of followers of John the Baptist there, whom Paul later encountered on his third missionary journey when he came to Ephesus. He clarified the gospel for those followers of John the Baptist, baptised them in the name of the Lord Jesus – that's recorded in Acts 19 – and then stayed for three years, three years.

Paul trained and retrained the pastors there, Acts 20. They loved him so much, they wept when he said he was leaving. Later, Timothy pastored the church at Ephesus. In fact, when Paul wrote to him, he gave him instruction about how to do it. Another faithful servant named Tychicus pastored there. And, finally, the great apostle John. So you would have to say they had the best of it: Aquila, Priscilla, Apollos, Paul, Timothy, Tychicus, John. It really was firmly founded on that third missionary journey of Paul when he was there for three years. It had an amazing beginning.

Go back to the 19th chapter of Acts. We won't belabour the point, but it is wonderful to see. While the gospel arrives with Aquila and Priscilla and is enriched by Apollos, things really break loose in the 19th chapter. Paul came to Ephesus and found some disciples, all right; they were the products of Aquila and Priscilla. He said to them: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They said, "No, we have

not even heard whether there's a Holy Spirit." And they were all connected still to John the Baptist, as I said, a moment ago. He tells them the truth of the gospel; they believe, they're baptised; and in a sense, the church is born.

Verse 8: "He entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." It went all over Asia Minor. That's how it got to the other cities. It was the planting of the church in Ephesus that launched into those other cities.

Verse 11: "God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul – " really extraordinary. "Handkerchiefs or aprons were carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and evil spirits went out. Some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempting to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus saying, 'I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.'" In other words, some of the false exorcists were trying to take advantage of Paul's name; didn't work.

"Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. And the evil spirit answered and said to them, 'I recognise Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded." Bad day for the false exorcists.

"This became known to everyone, Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus. Fear fell on all of them, and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many of those who had believed kept coming, confessing, disclosing their practices. And many of those who practised magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing." What an amazing beginning for a church. Talk about church planting: wow, incredible beginning.

Later in that 19th chapter, of course, there's a riot. As the antagonists of the gospel start a riot, Paul has to run for his life. Really an amazing, amazing beginning. Broke up idolatry.

Verse 23: "About that time, there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way." Verse 29: "The city was filled with the confusion. They rushed with one accord into the theatre, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's travelling companions from Macedonia." It turned into a riot. Why did the riot start? Because the gospel was destroying the business of selling idols. It was an amazing, amazing beginning.

Now, just a little bit about it – you can go back to Revelation 2 – a little bit about Ephesus. Ephesus was the place where John lived, I think about 60 miles from where he was on Patmos. Apparently, John went there after the fall of Jerusalem, and he's now in his 90s, and he's really the last apostle and the patriarch of the era in the church. Although Pergamos apparently was the actual capital, Ephesus was, by far, the greatest city. It was called *Luminasia* in Latin, the "Light of Asia." Prominent for many reasons. It had the greatest harbour in Asia Minor. If you go there today, you won't see it because the Cayster River, which flowed into the harbour, has filled up with silt over the centuries. But in those days, it was the greatest harbour in Asia Minor. And as a result of that, it was a place where many goods were brought, and from which many were sent.

Four great highways led into Ephesus: one came from the north from Pergamos and Smyrna; one came from the north-east from Sardis, Galatia, Phrygia into Ephesus; one came from the south-east, the great trade route from the Euphrates by Colossi and Laodicea into Ephesus; one from the north from the rich Meander Valley. Everything converged in Ephesus. It was called the "Market to Asia." It was the port of Corinth.

In later times, when the martyrs were brought from Asia to be thrown to the lions in the arenas in Rome, Ignatius called Ephesus the "Highway of the Martyrs." They were brought through Ephesus to Rome. It became the vanity fair of the ancient world. Politically, it was a free city. Rome gave Ephesus the right of self-governing. No Roman troops were stationed there, it had its own independence.

Biggest event every year was the Great Games rivalling the Olympic Games were the Ephesian Games. It was a massive pageant of athletics and drama and parades and sacrifices. And as Paul closes out 1

Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16 and verse 8, he says, "I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries."

Why did he want to stay? Why did he want to stay until Pentecost? Because in the month of May, the Games took place, and pilgrims of the entire ancient Mediterranean world came to Ephesus, and a great door would be open for the gospel. Likely, he didn't get to remain because of the riot started by the silversmith; but he wanted to.

From a religious standpoint, Ephesus was the centre of the worship of Artemis, Artemis, or Diana – sometimes called Artemis, sometimes called Diana. One of the characteristics of ancient paganism is that it had lost its distinction between the genders. That's not new, that's part of ancient paganism.

Diana, or Artemis, was the most sacred goddess in the civilised ancient Greco-Roman world, and the temple to Diana was one of the Seven Wonders. There was the Pharos Lighthouse in Alexandria; Egypt, there were the Pyramids; the Hanging Gardens of Babylon; the Tomb of King Mausolus; the Colossus of Rhodes; the Statue of Zeus on Mount Olympus; and the Temple of Artemis, or Diana, in Ephesus, made of glittering Persian marble. It was 425 feet long, one-and-a-half city blocks, 260 wide. Columns stood 60 feet high: 130 columns – 37 embellished with gold and jewels. And all of it was the gift of kings. The altar, beautiful beyond words, was carved by the Greek sculptor Praxiteles. It was a museum, and that temple was a sanctuary for criminals, a sanctuary for criminals. The worst criminals in the world found safety in Ephesus, which only led to the debauchery of the city.

It also was the bank of the Mediterranean. The wealthy kept their treasures in the inner shrine of the temple because it was sacred. Kind of a strange thing to have the same temple a sanctuary for criminals and a bank. It was big business, and the big business was selling idols to put on your chariot, to put in your house, to hang around your neck. It was beyond description. Historians say there were scores of eunuchs; thousands of priestesses, prostitutes; unnumbered herald singers, flutist's dancers. The worship was a kind of hysteria: a debauchery, drunkenness, sexual deviation, frenzies of shameless mutilation, mutilation. Heraclitus wrote that the morals of the temple were worse than the morals of animals. "The people – " he said, " – who engaged in that were fit only to be drowned."

Huddled in the middle of this city of such sin is a group of men and women proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ. And in spite of their environment, some of the greatest victories of grace that were ever won were won in the city of Ephesus. The church flourished; the church grew. The preaching by Paul had affected the worship of the idols; sales dropped off seriously. The little flock began to grow, taught by Timothy, and ultimately, by John – incredible. Faithful little flock in that place.

Now, that gets us to verse 2, where we want to be right now. There is a commendation of this church, and if they have anything that can be said good about them, it's marvellous, because remember this: all the people who were converted there were converted out of that culture, out of that dominating culture. This is a church to be commended.

Verse 2: "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary." If that church was in your town, you'd join. Wow.

"I know your deeds – " your labour, your *kopos*. Labour, again, as we saw this morning, "to the point of exhaustion – the kind of toil which takes everything that mind and muscle can bring." This was a church of people who toiled for the sake of the kingdom, for the sake of the gospel. They weren't lazy, they weren't indifferent; they were busy. They were giving everything they had – unlike some people who attend church and all they're looking for is a box seat to be entertained, or a banquet table to be fed spiritual food.

There are a lot of onlookers and watchers who love to eat the fruit of the harvest, but want no part of the planning and the cultivation. Not this group in Ephesus. They were all added and they were always added: teaching, loving, giving, sharing, proclaiming the gospel, ministering to one another, and for the sake of Christ. They were active – not a church offering weekly solace for the hours of boredom, not a church offering a couch to take a rest on, but a church that really understood a yoke under which they had been called to labour in ploughing the field and sowing the seed of the good news of Christ: service of love.

Not only were they known for their deeds and their toil in those deeds, but their perseverance, patience, *hupomon*. It literally means "to remain under." Same verse as "abide" or "remain" – *hupo*, under. This is not grim resignation, this is not just giving up; this is courageous gallantry which accepts hardship, suffering, persecution, loss. This is an invincible attitude that is not beaten down, is not cast out; it endures. They were persistent; they were staying with it. Their deeds were honourable God-glorifying deeds. They worked hard at it, and they stayed under the difficulties and persevered – hard-working, relentless, indomitable. What a wonderful church: not lazy, not looking for instant gratification.

Beyond that, verse 3 says something else about them: "You cannot tolerate evil men. You cannot tolerate evil men." They were intolerant of sin. They were sensitive to the presence of evil. They hated evildoers as God hates evildoers. They resented evil; they resented evildoers. They resented sin; they resented sin in the church. They recognised the damage that sin does to the fellowship and the testimony. They saw that sin in the church destroys the unity of the church and destroys the testimony of the church. They hated all that was morally bad, all that was spiritually bad. They knew that a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

Paul had told them in the letter that he wrote to the church, the letter called Ephesians: "Neither give place to the devil - " and they didn't. They wanted nothing to do with that which was from Satan. Of course, they hated evil outside the church, but this is telling us that they hated evil inside the church.

Maybe they followed the instructions of the Lord in Matthew 18. When they saw somebody sinning, they went to the person, and then they took two or three, and then they told the church, and then they pursued to bring back that sinner to repentance. I don't know what else you could say about the nobility of the church than to say they worked relentlessly under tremendous duress and pressure, and never gave up, and suppressed evil at the same time. Or, you could say this: "You put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false." This is a church with discernment.

Where does discernment come from? Well, where does discernment come from; clearly, it comes from a knowledge of the truth, right? The only way you can discern error is know what? Truth. You have to have the truth in order to see the error.

This is really an amazingly remarkable church. They're not orthodox by birth, they're not orthodox by atmosphere, they're not orthodox by osmosis; they're orthodox because they've been taught from the very beginning. They were taught by Aquila and Priscilla. They were taught by Apollos. They were taught by Timothy and Tychicus, Paul and John. They were a well-taught church. Their theology was so sound that they could literally measure anyone against the truth and expose error. In the words of Peter: "They could give a reason to any man who asked for the hope that was in them."

Many evil people come into the congregations, particularly in the early church. Satan was infiltrating these early churches all the time. Judaisers, false teachers were everywhere. This church took the warning seriously. Apostle Paul actually said to them in Acts 20, "After my departure, after my departure, grievous wolves are going to come in, not sparing the flock; and of your own selves, perverse men are going to rise up and lead you astray - " and he warned them. And you remember it says in Acts 20 that "he committed them to the word of God, which is able to build you up."

That was in his farewell address, [Acts 20:28](#) and following. When evil men of all types and all kinds, emissaries of false teaching – whatever it was – moved into the church at Ephesus, they were exposed. They were tested and failed the test. The only ones who were welcomed into that church were those who were faithful to the teaching of the Word of God.

Verse 6 says, in particular, that "they hated the of the Nicolaitans – " a heretical group, " - which God and Christ also hate." Amazing group: hard-working, persevering, intolerant of sin, knowledgeable in theology in truth so as to be able to discern true teachers and false teachers. And they did it all – look at verse 3: "persevering, enduring, for My name's sake."

Oh, that's the epitome, isn't it? They did it for the honour of their Lord. They had amazing powers of endurance. They were spiritual marathoners. He already said "perseverance and toil" in verse 2. Now He says perseverance again and adds, "have endured."

But the key is "for My name's sake, and have not grown weary." Sure, disappointments come, criticism comes, rebellion comes, struggles come. They never grew weary – hard-working, persevering, enduring,

undaunted, amazing group – and they did it all “for My name’s sake.” They did it for Christ. They did it for Christ. Supreme motive: for the sake of the name, for the sake of the name.

Paul went out to preach the gospel, Romans 1, for the sake of the name. John in his epistle, talks about those who went out to preach for the sake of the name. There were no personal ambitious agenda.

And then in verse 6 – just to comment on that – specifically they stood against the error of the Nicolaitans. Who were they? A little hard to be certain about it. It’s from the same Greek word as “over-comers,” “conquerors.” Maybe this is some kind of heresy that developed from a man by the name of Nicolas; perhaps the followers of that man. We don’t know who he is. But, eventually, it developed into some kind of a false cult, some kind of a sect.

Some historians say it was characterised by extreme indulgence and filth, uncleanness. In chapter 2, we’ll see it again, and it’s linked to Balaamism, Balaamism: Balaamism which was allowing the sensual into the church – some kind of false cult; some kind of false, corrupt, heretical movement – and they hated it. They took the Lord’s side on that.

I think it was Clement of Alexandria who once said about the Nicolaitans: “They abandon themselves to pleasure like goats, leading a life of self-indulgence.” It has been associated with loose living, immorality, perversion – maybe in the name of grace, maybe a kind of libertine license. But they rightly hated it.

You know, for all intents and purposes, you would say this is a great, great church. But, verse 4, we go from the commendation to the condemnation: “I have this against you, I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” Unmistakable: “You have left your first love.”

What do you mean by that? The flaming love that you had for Christ the day you were delivered from the kingdom of darkness; the burning heart that you had like those on the Road to Emmaus when the Scripture and the truth dawned on you and you saw the significance of His death and resurrection; the day when you realised that you had been delivered from the world; the day when you felt like Peter: “Lord, You know I love you. You know I love you. You know I love you – ” as he said three times in John 21 – those early days of hot hearts, passionate labour. Devotion to Christ, being consumed with Him, with loving Him was becoming replaced by a kind of dutiful, doctrinal coldness. The heat of that first love was gone and they left it, they left it.

You know, it’s a danger for all of us. I think we’re very much like the church at Ephesus: work hard, persevere, endure, know the truth, we have discernment, we hate sin, we’re capable of exposing error. But the danger for us is to leave first love. This really comes out of Jeremiah 2.

Jeremiah says, “The word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem saying: Thus says the Lord: I remember concerning you, the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals – I remember that – your following after Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown. You would follow me anywhere. I remember – ’ says God, ‘ – the love of your betrothals. I remember that.”

Jeremiah goes on to say, “You’ve long ago left that.” And that is the message that the Lord of the church gives to the church at Ephesus: the honeymoon is over. Love for Christ has cooled and this is very dangerous. The cooling of love for Christ is the forerunner of spiritual apathy. Apathy is the forerunner of love for something else. Love for something else means love not for Christ but for something else – and that means compromise with evil, and that means corruption, and that means death, and that means judgment.

And that’s the sequence of going from Ephesus to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Laodicea. You eventually become a church the Lord spits out of His mouth. Doctrinal, morally pure, zealous, hard-working, disciplined, born in an incredible way in the middle of the pentacle of paganism, born with a miraculous beginning of signs and wonders and an explosion of the gospel, having been given the privilege of the best of all possible leaders: you had it all. You still come, you still work, you still give, you still believe, you still sing, you still hold to the truth, but I know you don’t love Me like you did. You don’t love Me like you did – the supreme motive.

When the heart grows cold, you’re in danger. How serious is this? Verse 5, the Lord says, “Therefore, remember from where you have fallen. Remember from where you have fallen.”

What about you? Can you take it or leave it coming to church, take it or leave it reading the Scripture? You believe the right things. Are they as precious to you as they once were when you came bursting out of darkness into light, when you were delivered from sin and death and hell? Or have you grown cold.

Start by remembering: go back, remember how it was when you were truly converted. Remember from where you have fallen. Go back and remember the glorious experience that was yours when you came to Christ, and then repent. Remember; repent. And then do the deeds you did at first. You know how you restore the love? By going back and doing what you did at the beginning. Remember; repent of your lack of love – failure to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Repent of any cold, mechanical service to Christ, and then go back and do the deeds that you did at the very beginning. Go back and start again.

You say, "Well, this is kind of minor defect, isn't it?" Mm-mmm, because if you look at verse 5, He says in the middle, "or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent." I'm going to shut the church down.

Can you imagine when that pastor from Ephesus read that letter to that church the response? "You either repent, remember, and return to the things you did at the beginning, with the love of Christ burning in your heart, or I will put you out of business." It will not be a happy coming. "I'll remove the lampstand." That's the end of the church: "I'll terminate the church. I'll terminate it." Did that happen? Yes, that happened, that happened. And it all was so wonderful. Today, there's no church in Ephesus, not even a city there.

Some final counsel in verse 7 for all of us: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Another way of saying: "Are you listening? Are you listening? Everybody listen to what I just said." This transcends that church, that real church in a real place at that time. This transcends to all of you who hear this. "Listen, listen – " for all Christians, for all churches, for all time, " – understand the danger of leaving your first love and finding your exhilarating passion in something else other than Christ and His kingdom."

And then a promise: "To him who overcomes – " that term "overcomes" comes from 1 John, chapter 5, verse 4: "Whoever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?" "To you over-comers – " the call to faithfulness, " – to you over-comers, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God." That's a picture of heaven.

Eden was the created paradise of God on earth, Genesis 2 and 3. Heaven is the paradise of God above, Revelation 22. "To him who overcomes, to the true believer, the faithful believer, I promise you heaven."

Why does He say that? Because if you're there and you're a faithful believer, a true believer, and the Lord puts your church out of existence, you could conclude, "I'm done. I'm doomed." But, no. "To the overcomer, even in a church that has left its first love, I promise you heaven, I promise you heaven."

As we'll see when we go through the other letters, this is where the slide starts with leaving that first love. Even those of us who are believers, who will experience the tree of life in the paradise of God – as it's described in Revelation 22, in heaven – need to make sure that we do not leave our first love.

If I can borrow from this morning: Is this saying that there were people in the church at Ephesus, who actually failed to abide in Christ and walked away? Could be. "Don't do that. Stay, triumph through faith, and I promise you heaven."

Lord, we're so grateful that you've given us Your Word. It's so rich and powerful. It opens up so much to us that we need to know, need to understand, love to hear. But at the same time, Lord, with all of its wonders, all of its beauties, it is very convicting.

Deliver us, Lord, from the loss of first love. This can certainly mean a person who makes a pretense and walks away and is not an overcomer – doesn't abide, doesn't remain; like a Judas branch. But also even for us who are true, we need to remember a true conversion, true love, repent of our coldness, and return to the fire of those beginning years. May it never be that You would have to say to this church, "Go back to your first love or I'll put your light out."

We love You, Lord, and we want to love You more. We want to love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We want to live in the wonders of that first love when it all dawned on our dark hearts and

minds, and we were swept away in the joy of salvation. May the fires of that love burn in our hearts so that our light may continue to shine. These things we ask in Your Son's name, Father. Amen.