

Series: Seven Letters

Dear Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado, WaterstoneChurch.org

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A reading from Revelation 2:1-7: “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: “I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardship for my name and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far 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, but you have this in your favor. You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”’” The word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Paul: Thanks, Chris. Well, good morning. How are you guys today? It is good to be with you. As we are continuing our series on the book of Revelation, we started last week, and we entered the throne room of heaven, where we saw John, who was one of the people who was most familiar with Jesus. He had walked with Jesus throughout his life. He was there when Jesus turned water into wine. He was there when Jesus raised a little girl from the dead. He was one of the people who had seen Jesus revealed in the transfiguration. He was actually one of the only disciples who walked with Jesus all the way to the hill of Calvary, where Christ was crucified, and he was so close to Jesus at the moment of his death that Jesus looked at him and said, “John, here is your mother. I want you to take care of her,” and Jesus was talking about his own mother, Mary. John was one of the people who was closest to Jesus, who if anyone on Earth had a right to be familiar with Jesus, he was the one. Yet, what we saw last week is that in Revelation chapter one, this Jesus that John was so familiar with, that he had literally laid against his chest during the Last Supper, sees Jesus revealed in all of his resurrected glory in the throne room of heaven and falls on his face as though he were dead.

Have you ever had a moment when something seemed very familiar to you, and then suddenly you realized that you were in the presence of greatness? A few years ago, and many of you have probably heard this story, there was a violinist who entered a New York subway station, and he opened his case, began playing his violin, and he made \$32.00 in a period of about four hours. Passersby just heard the music and were like, “Oh, it is beautiful, but I have somewhere to go. I can’t just stand here and listen to a violinist in the middle of the subway.” It turns out that this violinist was actually an incredible musician. He was one of the premier violinists in the world, and in fact, the night before, he had been in Chicago, where he had played with the Chicago Symphony, and tickets had gone for no less than \$100 an item. He is one of the greatest musicians in the world, but seen in a subway, people just thought, “Yeah, I have got places that I got to be.” The night before, people had paid \$100 for the cheapest seats just to hear him play.

Sometimes we can go through life, and we can miss the greatness that is around us. Sometimes we can come into church on a Sunday morning, and it is just a part of our routine, and we are coming in for the worship and to hopefully hear a decent talk and to see some of our friends and connect and hopefully get some decent coffee and maybe a donut before Monday kicks in again, and yet when we come in on a Sunday, we are entering into the presence of Jesus, and not that He is not out there, but we are entering into a space where we are intentionally rewiring our hearts to encounter the greatness of Jesus Christ, to see Him in his resurrected glory, to remind ourselves that Jesus is anything but familiar, and so when John sees Jesus, he just falls on his face as though he were dead, Jesus revealed in all of his resurrected reigning glory.

What I think we sometimes miss is that the Jesus whom John sees in Revelation one is not a Jesus that he has seen in the future sense, that one day Jesus will appear like this, and he is not seeing Jesus in just a vision where he is encountering Jesus as He was, but that is who Jesus is right now. When we come in here to worship, when you pray your prayers before bed, when you come before Jesus to ask Him to intervene with your circumstances, you are praying to the resurrected and reigning Jesus. You are not praying to your buddy. You are not praying to a Jesus who is small or insignificant or who is overwhelmed by your problems. You are praying to a Jesus that John says is holding the cosmos in his right hand, and yet He is close enough to reach down that same hand to touch John on the back and to say, “Do not be afraid.” It is the same message that He has for you and me, and that message that He gave to John there, “Do not be afraid,” is not just simply a message for John in that moment. It is Jesus saying to the churches, saying to you and me, whatever your circumstances are, whatever is happening in your life in this moment, you do not need to be afraid, because you are a follower of the king of the cosmos who is Lord on high, and who is worthy of all of your praise and all of your life and all of your time and your energy and your effort.

How big is your Jesus? That question is really important as we move from Revelation one into Revelation two and three, because what we are going to see is that the resurrected reigning Jesus has a message for his churches. The Jesus who holds the cosmos in his hand is very concerned about what is taking place in his churches. In fact, there are seven tiny churches, smaller than Waterstone, scattered across western Turkey that He is very consumed with how they are doing, where their love for Him has gone, where their allegiance for Him is placed, the challenges that they are facing. What we are told by John in chapter one is that He is actually walking amongst the churches, that he is not a stranger to those churches.

I wonder how our worship would be affected if we believed that Jesus was walking amongst the aisles as we were worshipping Him, that as we walked in with the burdens that we are carrying, Jesus knows those burdens and what is laying on our hearts, that when we come in tired and worn out from the week, it is Jesus who is walking amongst us, who sees and who knows and is not far off. How would that shift our understanding of what we do on a Sunday morning or a Monday morning? What I am hoping this series will do is help reframe our understanding of who Jesus is and who He has called us to be as a church. The Jesus we encounter in Revelation one is much bigger than we imagine, but He is also deeply concerned with the intimate and the small details of his churches and of his people, and so today we are going to shift our focus from the throne room of heaven to Jesus’ message to the churches, but we need to

maintain that image of Jesus. If we lose that picture of Jesus as we go through these letters, these things that Jesus has to say to us, then we will not receive the full power of his message to us, because it is that resurrected, reigning Jesus who comes to the seven churches. He sees them, He is walking among them, and He has some notes, Waterstone, for those churches and for us, so I just want to dive straight in today.

We are going to start on Revelation chapter 2. If you have your Bibles, I would encourage you to follow along. You can grab one in the seat backs, or you can follow along on the screen, Revelation chapter 2, verse 1. We begin this way. The very first letter to the church Jesus has, and it begins this way: “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.’” Now what we saw last week is that the seven golden lampstands are the seven churches, and then what Jesus is saying here is that He holds the seven churches in his right hand, and He walks among the churches, but we need to understand a little bit about who the church of Ephesus is. It is the first church that Jesus has some notes for, and it is a really important church. It is the masthead church, the flagship church of the region of Turkey, that John is writing to.

Some of you might be familiar with some of the story, but it was actually one of the largest churches in the ancient world, and to get to your bearings, we have this map so you can see where Ephesus is. Hopefully you can read that, but Patmos right there down in the bottom left corner is where John is writing from, and he sends this letter to Ephesus and then to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and then finally to Laodicea. He sends out this letter, and what you need to understand is that this is actually a trade route. This is not some happenstance order that he chose. These are churches that would have been a very natural trade route that probably John traveled as he was going between these churches and pastoring them, but Ephesus is a particularly important church.

In fact, the apostle Paul spent three years planting the church in Ephesus, and after he left them, he left his disciple Timothy to take over pastoring the church, and what we are told is actually sometime later, the apostle John himself was the pastor of this church, so they have some heavy hitting pastors. They have Paul, Timothy and John, and remember I said Jesus invited John to take care of Mother Mary, and so church tradition actually says that when John moved to Ephesus to pastor this church, he brought Mary, the mother of Jesus, with him, and she attended this church as well. Could you imagine the Christmas pageants with Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the room? “That is not how it happened.” Like she would have so many notes. She would have so many things to say. Could you imagine the moments of trying to be a guest preacher in that room, and you are preaching about Jesus, the Son of God, and his mother is right there in the third row? She would be like, “No, you got it wrong.” Like, can you imagine the pressure in those moments? This church had some giants of the faith that had been pouring into it, and out of this church launched the rest of these churches. They were all connected through the work of Paul in Ephesus, of Timothy, of John, and of Jesus’ mother herself, and in those moments where they are experiencing the hardship and trouble and walking through these difficult spaces, they have these rocks of the faith that they could fall back on.

Another thing you need to know about Ephesus is that it was a very large city. It is a port city, so there was a lot of trade. There was money constantly flowing through this city. It was a very wealthy city, and there were two temples that were incredibly central to how the city worked. The first was the temple of Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the world. In fact, it was so large that it served as the

bank for the entire region, and then around the time that John is writing, a few years earlier, they had established a second large temple that was to the emperor of Rome, where they had declared the emperor of Rome, Caesar was Lord. Caesar was God, and so all of the Roman imperial worship in this city revolved around Artemis and the emperor, and when you understand that picture, it begins to show you a little bit of what this church was like. When Jesus says that He holds the seven stars, there is a word used there. It is not just that He is hanging on to them, but that He has a firm grip on the churches. He is not carrying these churches like a bag of groceries. He is holding them like I hold my son Landon's hand in a parking lot. There is a fierce grip to make sure that they are safe and taken care of, and when He is walking among the lampstands, that is present tense. That is continuous. He is not visiting them occasionally.

There are only a few places in scripture where God walks amongst something. You see that here, where He walks amongst the churches. You see that in Genesis one, where He walks in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day, and that imagery of a lampstand, that is a callback to the imagery of the lampstand that would have been in the temple, the menorah. There was a priest who would go in daily to make sure that the flame of the candles on the menorah never went out, so they would trim the wicks, and they would feed it oil, and they would make sure that the flame never went out. What Jesus is saying is that I am the pastor, the priest, the person who is making sure the flame of these churches does not go out. Waterstone, how is your flame of faith today? I talked about this idea last week, but is it beginning to flicker or dim, or does it feel like it is cold ashes, or is it burning and alive? So, in this very first sentence to the church in Ephesus, Jesus says in one single statement that He wants the church to know two things, that He is holding fast to them, and that He is close enough to see what they are going through.

Then he goes on in verses two and three, and what you will see in these letters that Jesus has is He does the feedback sandwich. Does anyone know what I'm talking about? He gives a compliment and says, "You're doing really well, but I have some notes. You need to improve a little bit," and then He finishes with like, "Hey, but you are doing okay," and that is the pattern for most of these letters. There are a couple of exceptions, but it is for sure what happens in the letter to Ephesus, and Jesus says in verse 2, "I know your deeds. I know your hard work, and I know your perseverance," and what Jesus is saying here is there are three ways He is framing the exact same thing. It is the Greek words for effort. It means sweat, to labor to the point of exhaustion. You are persevering. You are staying put under the weight. You are continuing to work hard. You cannot give up. You are people who no matter what comes at you, never seem to be exhausted. Even when you work yourself to the point of exhaustion, somehow you never end up being exhausted. You continue to work hard, and I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people and that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and you have found them false.

There is a great word play on the Greek here. In verse two He says, "You cannot bear up evil men," and then in verse three He says, "You can bear up hardship" for Jesus' name. It is the same word back-to-back. Essentially what Jesus is saying is you can endure hardship, but you cannot tolerate people who are liars, people who lie about who I am, who distort the gospel, who distort the truth. Which is so fascinating that Jesus calls them out for this and says, "You have done this well. You have tested those who claim to be apostles, but who are not, and you have found them false."

In Acts 20, when the apostle Paul has been preaching to this church for three years, they have seen some incredible things happen that I will tell you about in just a moment, but as he is getting ready to

leave, he leaves them with two charges. The first is he said, “I want you to be aware that there are going to be wolves who will rise up from amongst the church,” people inside the church. The calls are going to come from inside the house, and you need to be aware, and you need to stand guard. You need to protect the sheep. What is so beautiful is that we see thirty to forty years later that they have carried this out. They have taken that to heart. They have done what Paul charged them to do. That they have protected the sheep against those who would lie about who Jesus is, and then the second thing that we see in Acts 20 is the call to guard the sheep, to guard the flock, to test everything, but he also says that Paul served this church with tears, and that he warned them day and night for three years with tears. It is this deep love and affection for this church, that when he left, and he said, “I am leaving this church, and you will not see me again,” they grieved as if it were a funeral because of the love they had for one another and the love they shared, the passion they shared for Jesus, so there is a warning for the flock, and there is this deep passion that this church had for Jesus.

So, Revelation 2:2 is Paul’s warning obeyed for thirty to forty years. They never dropped it. They kept their word. Nobody would get anything past Ephesus. They would make sure the theology was sound. Then verse 4, where it says this: “Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love that you had at first.” You held on to the truth, but you let go of the love. You held on to the truth, but you let go of the love. Now this church, what you need to understand is there is only one critique against them. This is it. There is one thing that you are missing. One thing that you are not doing. You have forsaken your first love, and every translation softens this a little bit. “Forsaken” is probably trying to get the closest to the original. Some places say that you have drifted from your love or that you have just passively let it go, that it has not grown, but man, the actual language there is the inverse of what we read about Jesus’ grip He has on the churches. Jesus is holding the churches with a firm and steadfast grip, and what He says here is you let go of your love. You set it down. You stopped holding onto me.

Sometimes in our faith journeys we have experienced, and I think one of the reasons why so many people resonate with the letter to Ephesus is that we hear these words, “You have forsaken the first love,” or, “the love that you had at first,” and we think, “That feels like me. That feels like my story.” We think back to when we became a believer, the moment that grace first touched our lives, that Jesus first grabbed a hold of us and showed us his glory and his kindness and his goodness, and do you remember the passion? Do you remember the fervor? Do you remember how you couldn’t stop talking about what Jesus had done in your life? We saw a glimpse of this last week in one of the baptism videos, where Amanda, she shared, and she said the words perfectly. She was like, “I love Jesus, and I can’t shut up about it. I just have to tell people that what He has done, and I want people to know that Jesus is king. I want people to know how beautiful and how good Jesus is,” and many of us, when we think of coming to church on a Sunday morning, it is more obligation than desire or passion. Many of us, when we think of living for Jesus, it is more prescription than excitement. We know what it is to feel like we have lost our first love.

A couple weeks ago, I went to Tap and Dough down the street. Have any of you guys have been to Tap and Dough before? Great restaurant, so good. The pizza is awesome. I was there having lunch with a friend from church, and they said the special of the day was the Palisade Peach pizza. Do any of you guys have this? Okay, some of you know exactly what I’m talking about, okay? It is a pizza with feta and mozzarella and peaches, which usually I’m not a fruit guy on pizza, like just hard pass. I think that’s, it is

sinful. Let's just call it what it is, but they have this hot honey that you pour over it, so you feel a little more manly as you're eating it, and it was the best thing I have eaten in a year. Like it was so good. I just like, when I got back, I came to the office after my lunch appointment. I was like, "Guys, have you tried the hot honey Palisade Peach pizza at Tap and Dough? It is seasonal, so if you haven't had it yet, make sure you get there and get it before it goes away. Like you have to try this pizza. It will change your life," and I could not stop talking about it for like three or four days, and then I forgot about it, and I did not remember how good it was. Then I was thinking of this message, and I was like, "My gosh, that was so good, and I am going to tell the whole world about how good it was." Then in a couple days, you are not the whole world. You are like 150 people, 200 people. Then I just thought, "I'll forget again," and that is such a telltale sign of the things we love. The things that we love are the things we talk about, the things that we want to share with others, the things that we want other people to experience. When was the last time that you told someone about the goodness of Jesus and how He has changed your life and how if you just try Jesus, you will find that He is everything you have been wanting and longing for? How many of us think, "Jesus, He has changed my life, but I don't know what He would do for someone else. I do not know if I want to tell them all about the pizza, because what if they don't like it?" What we love is what we talk about, and what Jesus says here is that you have forgotten your first love. You have let go of the love that you had for me. You have let me go.

What is so interesting is that Ephesus is one of the churches we actually have a lot of background on, because they're talked about in Acts quite a bit, and then there's also a letter from Paul to the Ephesians, which we are going to look at and study next fall, but as Paul is writing to them, one of the things that he says to them after he has been imprisoned is he gives them commendation. He says, "I see how hard you have been working," and he is praying for them to be rooted and grounded in love. Forty years later, Jesus writes this list of everything they still have, deeds, labor, sweat, endurance, discernment, truth, but there is one thing that has been deleted from Paul's letter, and that is love. The love is missing, so you have to ask a little bit of what was the love that they had at first, and again, you can find some of the answers to that. You go back to Acts 19, and you can see the whole story of the church of Ephesus from the beginning, and what essentially happens is Paul comes to Ephesus, and he has this question for the church there. In Acts 19 he finds about twelve believers in the city of Ephesus, and while Apollos was at Corinth and preaching to that church, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus, and there he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" and they answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is such a thing as the Holy Spirit."

It is like that Mariah Carey meme. Have you seen it? Where she is like, I do not know her at all. Have you seen that? Maybe not. I won't use that next service. They do not even know who the Holy Spirit is. They say, "No, we were baptized in John's baptism. What are you talking about? What is this Holy Spirit?" So, Paul prays for them, he lays hands on them, the Spirit descends, and it just goes gangbusters. Like it just ignites this church on fire, to the point where everyone starts coming to the faith. The whole region is turning to Jesus, and you see all of these people who practice sorcery or witchcraft, and they had pushed against the kingdom of light with the kingdom of darkness, and they begin to see the miracles that Paul is able to do and that Jesus is doing through the church, and they say, "Wow, what would that be like to have Jesus change our lives too?" So, they give those things up to the point it gets so radical that literally

some of the economy changes in the city, where people who worshipped Artemis and all of the tradesmen who would make idols for Artemis are out of work. They have no money to make, because no one is worshipping at this massive temple anymore, and so they start a riot to push back against Paul and the Christians, that you are changing the economy, because so many people are bending the knee to Jesus that they no longer worship Artemis or at Caesar's temple.

In fact, it gets so drastic that we are told that they bring all of their idols, all of the witchcraft books, all of the places and the things that they have been holding onto against Jesus, that the whole church brings those things into the town square and burns 135 years' wages worth of items. I mean, they are giving everything to Jesus. Their church is ignited with passion for Him. They are turning their backs on everything so that they can hold on to who Jesus is, letting go of the sin that has defiled them, the places that they have been living in the kingdom of darkness. They are coming into the light, letting it all go. That is what their first love looked like, repentance and pursuing Jesus with everything that they had, pursuing Him with everything that they had, and then something happened over the forty years that this church had been alive. Their theology stayed good, their serving stayed good, their resistance to culture was still excellent, but they had lost sight of Jesus. They had replaced this deep, honest affection for Jesus, and they replaced it with things like strong morals or traditional values. "I am morally sound. I have got traditional values. Culture can deal with it." They had all of this external religion that they could live out in the public square, but their internal reality had released Jesus.

My family, when we go on trips, we set our lights to a timer, so while we're not home, it looks like someone is home, and now I just told a bunch of you that, and so that's probably not great to let you know, but you know what I'm talking about, right? It is the house that has been empty, but it is made to look like there is someone still home. That was the church in Ephesus. The lights are still on, but there is no life there. They have just been going through the motions. They understand the truth, but it is not changing or affecting their lives. Jesus is saying in this moment, "I want you to wake up, because you do not look at me like you used to." Could you imagine you were sitting across from your spouse? A couple of weeks ago, Stephanie and I had our fifteen-year wedding anniversary. Yeah, it was great. Awesome. Trying to catch up with some of you others, but could you imagine if I sat down with her at dinner, and I slid her across a sheet of paper, and I said, "Hey, I just want you to know I think things are going really well. My attendance has been really good lately. I have been showing up and doing the dishes the way that you need me to. I have been making sure I am invested in the kids' lives," and I just say, "Before we order, I would like to walk you through all of the things I think I am delivering to this relationship." How do you think that conversation is going to go? That is not what Stephie wants to hear from me. She would say, "Okay, fine, but like, where is our love?" The words in verse four, this forsaken love is marriage language. Jesus is saying, "You do not love me like you used to. You don't care about me the way that you used to. There is no passion. There is no fire. There is no life in our relationship anymore."

If Jesus sat across from you, and He asked you, "How is the relationship going?" How is the anniversary of however long you have been joined to Him? I want you to imagine that at this conversation it is not just the Jesus of The Chosen, as great as that show might be. It is the Jesus of the cosmos, who holds the stars and walks among the lampstands, the eyes of blazing fire that can see through everything, the feet of bronze that are strong enough to stand up against whatever circumstances are in this world, and

He says, “How is the relationship?” and you can’t hide anything. How would you answer? What would you say? What I think the letter in Ephesus shows us is that you can run a faith, you can run a church, you can run a program for forty years on momentum you no longer have. That’s true. We see that in life and marriage. Momentum feels exactly like there is life there, until it stops, and so Jesus says this. He says in chapter 5, this is how you get back your first love. “Consider how far 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.”

Now I want to talk about, for lack of a better term, the warning at the end: “I will remove your lampstand from its place.” What Jesus is saying is that you can pursue all of the right things. You can have the right theology. You can know the right things. You can be really grounded in your values and understand who He is, and if you do not love Him with all that you are, then there is no promise that that church will remain a living, burning church, that the lampstand can be removed. He gives us a way back to igniting the flame that we had at first, and there are actually three Rs that I want you to look at.

The first is, it says, “consider,” here, but actually a better word would be, “remember.” Jesus is essentially saying, “I want you to remember from where you have fallen,” not remember that you fell, but remember from where you were. Remember the altitude. Remember the height of where we used to be together, and it is a present tense. It is, keep remembering, keep bringing yourself back to that place. As a pastor, I have the privilege of doing weddings several times a year, and what is amazing to me is no matter where Steffie and I are in our relationship, no matter the hard days or the good days, every time I go to do a wedding, and I stand before someone, and I officiate a wedding, where they respond by giving their vows, it reminds me every time why I married Steffie. Have you ever had that experience at a wedding before? It takes you back. “Oh yeah, I remember that moment. I remember standing at the altar. I remember the words the pastor said, and I have forgotten why I chose them in the first place,” and you are reminded, “Oh yeah, I chose to give this person my life.” He is calling us to remember that moment, to remember the height from which we have fallen. So many of us know this, because we grade our relationship with Jesus on what we have done lately, how well we have performed, but Jesus is calling for a different reality.

Some of us know what this is like, and I want to use the illustration of hiking. Have you ever been on a hike, where you are coming downhill, but it is just like a 2% grade? It is not like the 7% grade, where you are walking backwards, like you are like, “I just hope I don’t fall forward,” but it is just like 2%. You can barely notice it, and you go for like three miles, and you never notice once. You never once feel like you are descending until you get all the way down to the bottom. It feels just like walking. Your legs feel great, you feel strong, you are making incredible time, you feel really proud of yourself, and then finally you look at your watch, and you realize, “Oh my gosh, we just descended like 800 feet.” You do not realize what is happening until the watch shows you how far you have come, and verse 5 is Jesus handing the church the watch and saying, “Remember where you were at and how far you have come.”

So many of us do not fall by jumping off a cliff. I would say that most of you are not in danger of walking out of church today and renouncing Jesus and saying, “I want nothing to do with Him anymore,” but a slow, downhill descent over years, where church just became an obligation, where things just got stale, where you just began to forget what was important to you, that happens to all of us. A busy season becomes a tired year, then becomes a decade where church is just a job that you are good at, a relationship with Jesus, where you have just gently followed the grade away from Him, and Jesus is saying, “Tell me

that you remember where we have been before. Tell me that you remember where we started. Go back to where it began. Keep remembering where we started this journey together.”

In the second R, He says this, “repent.” “Remember,” is this ongoing thing. “Repent” is this tense where it shifts from ongoing to you need to turn. It is a one-time action, and notice who is being told to repent in the book of Revelation. It is very rarely the people outside of the church. It is always the church over and over and over again, chapter 2, 3 and onward, it is Jesus calling the church back to repentance, to turn back to Him. So, here’s a question I have been sitting with all week, and it has been bothering me, so I want it to bother you, honestly. What is your life without the presence of Jesus? What is this church without the presence of Jesus?

There is a story in Exodus 33 where Moses is told that they can have the promised land, but God’s presence is not going to go with them anymore, and I wonder if Jesus gave you the same offer, if you could have the health, the wealth, the family, the growth, the good things, minus his presence, not would you take it, but how long would it be before you would notice? How long before you would notice that Jesus’ presence was not with you in your life? Would it bother your day-to-day life? Would it change anything? Jesus says He is the one who is walking among the lampstands. He is walking amongst us. He knows what is happening in our life. His presence is with us. Do we want it? So, He says, “Repent and turn back to who I am. Turn away from the things that have drawn your love away from me,” and it is not groveling. It is turning back. Turn around to face the direction that you have been going, and to face Jesus again, to pursue his presence over the things of this world.

Then the third R is, “repeat.” He says, “Do the things that you did at first,” and He says, “You have lost your first love,” and then, “I want you to go back, and I want you to do the things that you did at first.” It is the same word. It is the first love reversed. Jesus welds them together on purpose. The road back to first love runs through first works, not fireworks. Sometimes we think that in order to recapture love, we just need the spark again. We just need to have that feeling. If we could just conjure up a feeling for the person we love or for our spouse or for Jesus, that if we could just muster up the feelings that we know that we need to have in the relationship, then that would solve everything, but we know that that is not true. We can’t make ourselves feel things that we can’t feel. Jesus is not asking you to produce a feeling within your heart that you do not have. He is asking you to work on the things that you did at first. He is not saying that the feelings you felt for Him at age twelve or sixteen or twenty-five or forty-seven, when you first came to Him, that if you just go back to that space, it will all fall into place. No, He is saying that the motion comes first. It is loyalty you act on.

I learned this last year when I was in physical therapy. I tore my rotator cuff, stupid accident. I will tell you about it some other time, and in PT, I was trying to regain strength in my shoulder, because I literally could not lift it beyond this point, and it was when I could not lift it beyond this point, I was like, “I should probably go to the doctor and get that figured out. That is not how it is supposed to be,” and I went to PT, and the physical therapist, they handed me a rubber band. It felt so demoralizing, and she would just be like, “All right, I need you to just stretch the rubber band twenty times. You just need to do this motion and try to build your strength back,” and I was like, “How is that going to heal my arm?” She is like, “It is not. It is not going to feel healed. It is going to continue to hurt. It is going to continue to be painful, and then it won’t. Then it will begin to change. Then that strength, that repeated action, will begin

to build back up the strength that you lost,” and now look at me. I can do this. What Jesus is saying is that it is the motion, not the emotion, that kindles our first love. It is not going to start feeling normal just because you tried to feel something. How do you go back to what you felt at the beginning? You remember, you repent of the sin that has pulled you away, and you repeat the daily actions, dedication that pulls love into your heart.

Verse 7, we will finish with this: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give them the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God,” and I want you to notice Jesus said earlier that He walks among the lampstands. The place that we see that phrase used about God is in the Garden of Eden, and what is the promise here at the end? The motivational promise is that if we are victorious, if we continue to pursue our first love, then He will give us the right to eat from the tree of life. We will go back to the garden with him, and we will have eternal life and experience his presence forever. Which is why it is such an important question of whether or not you would have everything you could have in the world if it meant you did not get Jesus’ presence. Because one day we are headed to a place where Jesus’ presence will be all and in all, and if that does not sound appealing to us, if that feels like a disappointment, if that feels like, “Is that it? All the endurance, all the hard labor, all the exhaustion is just so I get to be in the presence of Jesus?” you may have forgotten your first love. You may have released, and you may have let it go

So here is what I want to happen. I am going to invite our prayer ministers forward this morning. We are going to sing the last song of response, and I know that there are people that this literally says, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches,” plural, not just to Ephesus, to all the churches. That means this place, and if the Spirit is prompting your heart today, and it is saying, “You know what? That is you. You have let go of your first love,” and you are wanting to rekindle that. If you are wanting to remember, to repent and to repeat what that love felt like, I’m just going to simply ask you to come forward and have myself or one of our other prayer ministers, they are going to be down here in the front, to pray over you. You do not have to be specific about the reasons you have lost that first love. You can just come forward as simply as saying, “I want to love Jesus again like I did at first. I want Him to be the ultimate priority in my life. I want to rekindle that flame.”

About ten years ago, when I began to work at Waterstone, I had several friends, and this is anecdotal, so I have not really shared this story much, but I had several friends who attended church here, and then they left, and I asked why they left, and they said, “Paul, I don’t know how to describe it, but it just feels like there is no life. It feels like there is no life,” and it broke my heart, because on the one hand, I mean, God was absolutely doing things in our church. It is anecdotal, but on the other hand, it is this moment of recognition that if we do not pursue Jesus with all that we are, we can become a lifeless church, and so what do we want, Waterstone? What do we want to be as a church? A place where people feel like there is no life, or a place that has been so ignited by a passion for Jesus that we are willing to give everything up for Him? So, prayer ministers, you can go ahead and come on forward, and then if you would like me or one of them to pray for you today, I’m going to invite you to come forward as well, as we sing this last song. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, we come before you now, and God, if your Spirit is stirring in anyone’s heart today, the invitation is that for those of us who have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying

to us, if we respond to that, then that is the beginning of the blessing of your presence. That is not just something that we get someday in eternity, but something that is on offer right now. God, Waterstone is a good church. We are a church of truth. We are a church of conviction. We are a church that knows how to live and serve you. God, some of us have forgotten that that is supposed to come from a place of love. I just pray right now that we would return to that love, and it is in Jesus Christ's name we pray, amen.

Let me now close in a benediction, and if you feel comfortable, you are free to extend your hands to receive this blessing. Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit, God, we pray that Waterstone would be a church that would be on fire for you, that as you, Jesus, attend the flame of this church, you would not let it go out, that you would ignite our passion, our desire, our hearts for you. Father, for the places where we have maybe fallen away, for the sin that has pulled us, for the things that we have forgotten, God, cause us to remember and to repent. God, may you encounter us this week in profound and beautiful ways, where we see your presence, and we say, "Oh yeah, that is why." When we see those moments, may we have hearts that burn for you and turn to you. It is in Christ's name we pray, amen. You may go in peace.

47:10 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

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