

Passing of the Early Glory

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of maintaining first love for Christ and the dangers of spiritual decay in the church of Ephesus.

Duration: 36:46

Scripture: Genesis 3:22, Revelation 2:5

Topics: "Brevity"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of returning to our first love for God. He explains that simply expressing love for God is not enough; it must be accompanied by obedience and action. The speaker references the biblical story of Jesus questioning Peter's love for him and instructing him to feed his sheep. The sermon concludes with the call to remember, repent, and repeat our dedication to doing the work that once characterized our lives when our first love for God was burning brightly.

Transcript

May I invite you to turn with me for a little while this morning to the message that is recorded in the opening verses of chapter 2 in the book of the revelations, namely the message of the ascended and exalted Lord of the church to the community of his people living in Ephesus. Now I'm not going to read that passage again, but may I suggest that you keep your New Testament open and we shall turn to a number of verses as we move along. Delightfully situated on a hill near the mouth of the river Caesar, Ephesus, you may remember, was the chiefest city of the province of Roman Asia.

The church was greatly, greatly honored by those who ministered in the midst of the believing community, and we are given to understand that at one time it really was he who brought light on the church of the righteous. Nevertheless, according to the words that we have in our message, in our document before us this morning, when at the instigation of the Savior, a black spot appeared at the heart of Ephesus, he in glory depicted a hidden flaw that could very well lead to a greater tragedy, even the removing of the lamp from the church. And so it is to the uncovering of that hidden flaw that we turn to our meditation this morning.

Now the first thing I would like us to look at I would like us to look at the decorum that characterized the outward turn of the church. The decorum that characterized the outward turn. In the human eye, it would be very difficult to find any flaw in the community of God's people.

Besides the acute problems with which the community of God's people has been presented, the interests of the community have been settled, despite all the signs of a paradigm shift. Everything seems to have passed away. The church has come as a tribute or a gift to the unflagging dream and enterprise of this believing community.

And not only that, we see that the church has come in the presence of that dream. Over concerns of God the King, as it has been given them once for all in the Lord Jesus Christ. Now look for a moment at the important text that we have today.

It's just three sentences. First of all, the church showed a well-parted dream in the garrison of the Master. I know your work, Peter.

What horror and what chastity and fury! I know you are enduring chastity and fury not for my name's sake. And you have not learned nearly. I know your work.

The assembly of God's people here has passed beyond the coffin in the coming day. It's an act of the Lord. The Lord looking down from his seat in the glory says, I know your work, your sins.

It is actually at work to steal a divinely ordained treasure. And then he goes on to say, I not only know your work, but I know your sins. Now that refers to the puzzle that lay behind the act of it.

The atmosphere all around was hidden. And not only challenging, but sometimes menacingly so. It was somewhat dangerous to the Savior, loyal to the Savior and everything.

And so it inspired us not only to begin the master's bidding. Looking down upon the assembled people, the Lord says, I want you to know that I'm fully aware of the toil and of the struggle that characterizes your ministry and your measure. And then he goes further.

He says, I also want you to know that I am aware of your faith and your duty. It is your faith that sets you free. The harvest was slow at first, but they gave them a time in very quickly.

We know it was difficult, but there weren't many hundreds at this particular time. But grace has been done. They were such as you.

They were remaining faithful to their cause. They were continuing to labor for the master through a hard, dutiful experience of apparent grace. And verse three underlines it.

I know it is the master. You are enduring patiently and bearing up for my ministry. And you have not grown weary.

Then there was the church's holy boldness in testing serious apostles. Look at the second part of the second verse again. You have put these things before these days of apostles, but are not, and have found them to be false.

Not only did the church of Ephesus carry out its mission with fortitude in an alien environment, but it generously took the pretensions of supposed apostles. Coming in the guise of apostleship, these supposed champions of the cause sought a foothold within the community of Dantians in order to exercise an influence that would have been evil. But the young assemblers, perhaps I should say established somewhat by this act, they gave the praise and the tongues and the balance.

They listened to their testimony and their pretensions and their slayings. And in the light of all the facts, they concluded that they were not apostles at all and were no longer here. And then there was this.

There was a perfect partnership between the two. Look at that picture. Yet this you have, you see the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Now I sometimes feel that this is a most difficult question to address. To have anyone's partnership manifest in one's life a holy anger. So often we pretend that we have this, but God knows more often than not it becomes a crime.

But here we will notice the church offices in each village with their own lords see that they don't wish it but they must it. The Lord says, I hate the Christians of the Nicolaitans and so do you and the Englishmen of Venice. Let us repeat then without going any further for a moment.

It was difficult for a Christian to find any part of this community. It seemed to be a paradigm of excellence. There's a proverb that characterized the outlaw force.

May I come to your notice, my dear? The deterioration of this community. The deterioration of this community. At the very same time as in this village before the dawn of the hour to atone of the life of the church of the head of the church he who holds the stern charge in his right hand he who walks among the lampstands he who beholds the sign of decay and deterioration in the inner shrine of the house.

And he believes that this can so develop that it can bring about the entire collapse of the spiritual life of the church. Now the Lord pinpoints it all in this phrase that we all know. Thou hast let thy birth come.

I have this again to say to you. Thou hast let thy birth come. All of you are appreciative of the love that you have expressed.

Now in order to appreciate the significance of this charge I think we must first of all contribute this peacefulness of love. What is love? It's not purely the cancer that the heart feels. It's a waning emotion.

It is the flame on the inner altar moving, slow and extensive. The fire is not yet burnt out by any means. It's still radiant heat that can be felt.

The power still rides the machinery of constant activity and it inspires perseverance in one's own self-efficacy. It's not burnt out yet. But the burn is still there.

And the flame is receding. And a process has begun that can lead first of all to allow the flame state of pittance in the church. And ultimately the consequences that are very powerful because the Lord says, if you don't repent I will take away the candle.

First love then is something that teaches something profound, it's something of primary importance. What is it? May I suggest in the first place that first love is an exclusive It is given whole and exclusively to one person at a time. Others will only share with one insofar as they come under the umbrella of that one person's concern or companion.

You may remember this exclusive note coming out in the testimony of a cinematographer in the time of Solomon. Somebody told her by asking her the question, what is your beloved more than another beloved? And impatiently she replied, we seem all together lovely. There is no one else like it who stands alone, aloof and unique.

And my heart is ravaged by him and him alone. That first love its focus is the whole of its being upon one chosen object and it is completely absorbed, exclusively absorbed by him. First love is also love that is unflinchingly unique.

It can no more withhold its stream of warm ardent outflow than the rising sun can withhold its reach in the sky. The emergence of first love is the full sunrise of the day. And wherever you find it you will also discover a buoyancy and a frivolousness that loops over obstacles and delivers all difficulties in the service of the Lord.

In the heart of an expert, first love takes the life in its hand, as it were, and takes the state by state and by state. And first love is imaginative in some people. They can always do what is required of it, of course, and it will always honour the commands of the Beloved.

But first love is so special, spontaneous, it is even more special than unwrapping. You can't limit its expression to that which is being proper and customary. It will think of some special way of expressing itself.

First love is always preparing some eruductive, rustic, precious ointment before it can master its use at some appropriate moment. You can't make out what it's going to do next, as long as it's confronting you, as it were, at its peak. And, may I say this, first love is coming to you.

By that I mean this. First is a deep longing that it cannot live on past experience, nor upon the concentration of things that are yet to be in the future. I find that sometimes you can divide the Christian community into two.

There are those who always go back to the past. When you find other people they're always living in the future. Oh, when the Lord comes again, what a day of rejoicing that will be.

Now, I'm not suggesting that either of these two attitudes are wrong. But what I am suggesting, my friend, is this, that first love is satisfied with neither of them, nor even with both of them. First love demands the presence of the Lord Jesus now.

It looks back with gratitude to all that it has known of Him, and it looks forward believingly in hope of the glory of God. But it must have Jesus now. It judges everything by this.

It goes to church, it goes to the prayer meeting, it comes to a convention, and this is the criterion of judgment. Was Jesus there? And if Jesus is not there knowingly then it is not satisfied. And then may I say this about first love? It is trustful love.

It believes and it trusts even when it cannot trace and understand. The late Dr. Campbell Morgan relates a very delightful story which I think I can use this morning to illustrate this. Some of you may know it.

He speaks, or rather writes, of a nun who saw three people in prayer in a dream. As they kneeled, the Lord appeared apparently, and coming to the first of the three that were kneeling in prayer, he put his hand upon her shoulder and knelt lovingly over her, full of tender solicitude and smiles and obviously exuding radiant love for her. Then he came to the second, he put his hand upon her shoulder and said a few words to her and passed on to the third.

When the nun in her dream expected him to say something to the third, he just gave her a look and barely smiled and passed on. And the nun in the story concluded, oh, how he loved the first of the three. He must have had a special place in his heart for her.

And the second, yes, he must have thought much of her too. But what could the third have done to displease her Lord? And at that point still the story goes, the Lord appeared to the nun and explained to her that she was all out of focus in her judgment. These are the recorded words.

He said to her, oh, woman of the world, how wrongly hast thou judged. The first kneeling woman needs all the succor of my constant care to keep her feet in the narrow way. The second has stronger faith and deeper love.

But the third, whom I seem to pass abruptly by, has faith and love of the finest fiber. And her I am preparing by swift processes for highest and holiest service. She knows and loves and trusts me so perfectly as to be independent of works and looks first love trusts.

The distinctiveness of first love. But now look at the departure from that first love. Now will you please notice the words that are used here.

There are three words which are most revealing. And it may very well be that as we examine our own hearts we shall find that these three words will remind us of certain things that have taken place within the sanctuary of our own hearts. In our own experiences.

Now first of all thou hast left thy first love. There is the thought there of a deliberate change of course. You're traveling in the car and you're going straight forward.

You're following the main highway and then suddenly you turn one side. Now that's the thought. A deliberate change of course.

Now look at the second again in verse five. Remember then from what you have fallen. Fallen.

It has been claimed by some folk that first love is an immature love in personal relations. And that to leave it behind is necessary to progress as if there was something better further on. That is certainly not true in the soul's relation to the Savior.

Listen my friends. Departure from first love is a fall. It's never an ascent but a descent.

A come down. There is no stage of love that supersedes it and to deviate from it is to fall. But look again.

Repent of the Savior. And that means of course that it is a sin to forsake one's first love. You are only called upon to repent when you have sinned.

And the Master says look you have sinned. It is a shortcoming. It is an evil.

It is a sin. And when once a man has departed from this his spiritual life will sooner or later decay and degenerate. For a while the outward appearance may still bear the marks of evangelical receptability.

The language may remain meticulously orthodox and a man's sheer activity to continue apace with his opposition to and condemnation of current sin losing none of its trust or ferocity. But something has done. The leaves are beginning to wither on the trees.

And that's betoken the oncoming of winter and of death and disaster. And then what happens? Well, when the thing blossoms forth into what is not ultimately what happens is this. The love that was exclusively given to the one is shared by many.

And you know as well as I do that the biblical term for this is harlotry. My friend, is your love this morning a shared love? A love that is given to the world and its sin and its evil and its whatnot. Given to things that are utterly inconsistent with the person of Him whom you call your Savior and your Lord.

The love that was exclusively given to one is shared with many. The love that was once offered ungrudgingly in service still is the inspiration of some kind of service, perhaps but that moaning, groaning, grousing kind of obedience of which some of the prophets speak. Malachi, for example.

You remember Malachi quotes some of the people of his deity saying, it is vain to serve God. What is the good? What is the profit of it to the atheist? Although keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts. My friend, when first love vanishes it's so difficult to go to the prayer meeting.

It's so difficult to study the Word of God. Oh, the whole world is against one. You may still be continuing but in your heart there's a grouse and a grumble.

And it's all a misery in the shrine of the soul. Friend, is that you this morning? And the love that once was imaginative and spontaneous has degenerated into a cold icy mechanical punctiliousness that strains itself to keep the letter of the Lord perhaps but has lost all thought of that bounteous exuberance and self-giving against which there is no law. And the love that once was dissatisfied with anything short of the very presence of the beloved is now quite satisfied if it can just remember a few blessed things that happened long ago.

Or be reminded of things that are yet to be by the mercy and the incalculable grace of God. And the love that was trustful and full of faith has become a seething state of doubt and uncertainty. That is the alternative to first love.

That is the end product, my friend, despite the fact that the lapse may appear trivial and harmless in its early stages. You may be tempted to say to me at this moment, ah yes but it's not all that important. I'm not such a sinner after all.

I've not gone with those worldlings that are back in their evil haunts or with other backslidden folks that are living a life of open sin. I'm not there. My good friend, listen.

This is a very serious state of affairs. And if things continue as they are, God only knows the end of what begins as first love vanishing. The passion for orthodoxy and the preaching of truth without first love, I believe the apostle Paul would brand as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.

We could say in the idiom of our day perhaps that it is more like a mechanical computer spitting out the right answers but all the while remaining remote and aloof from the real life and the troubles and the problems of men and women having no feeling with them in their pains and their trials. Such irony, such iron exponents of truth are as remote from being the ideal Christian as parrots are from being apostles. My good friend, the question that faces you and faces me this morning is this.

Not what we appear to be. It's not what we are as far as men can see. But the real question is this.

The Lord upon the throne looks down upon our hearts and he knows us through and through. What does he see? And I'm not speaking to the out-and-out sinner in Zion this morning but to that respectable God-fearing believer, apparently who's eager to condemn sin in all and sundry. If any man trips up, you'll be the first to point your finger.

If there is a preacher in the pulpit that doesn't come down absolutely full square on every orthodox point, you'll be the first to note. And I'm not saying that that is wrong in and of itself. God forbid.

But what I am saying is this. My good friend, in your heart at this moment there may be a poison that is insidious and evil. And as far as you are concerned can bring about the total eclipse of your spiritual life.

Now just one word as we close. The demand for immediate reformation. Three words sum up our Lord's message to this church.

You read the commentaries and they so often refer to these words by three R's. Two are found in the text, of course. Remember, Repent, and Repeat.

Our Lord says Remember them from what you have fallen. The call is to sit alongside their present experience the past as they remember it. And they're commended to remember it.

My friend, you and I are commended this morning I believe, in the light of this word, to dig up from the graveyard of forgotten things some of the experiences of the past which are so precious. Remember the glory. Remember the joy you had in the presence of the Lord in days that have gone.

Remember how your first love made you run uphill as well as downhill. There were no obstacles that stood in your way. You were early up if the Master demanded it.

You were late to bed if the Master required it. There was nothing too great for you to do. You were glad to give and to do and to be and to say anything that Jesus said.

And in the quietness of this tent in my Master's name I want to invite you this morning to remember. Oh, remember. Remember.

You've tried to forget some of those glorious mountaintop experiences and you've wandered away from them. But here in Keswick this morning, in the name of my Lord I plead with you, let them come back again. Let them come crowding to the memories.

Oh, Spirit of God, help us in this. But wait a moment, that's a means to an end. Why should we remember these forgotten things? I'll tell you.

In order that they may goad us to repent. In order that they may bring us to the place where we shall abandon our present way of life and return to the way of obedience and live in the light of the full glare of Christian truth. And what then? Well now, what are we to do? Does the Lord want us this morning to say that we loved him as once we did? No, no, my friend.

The Lord wants something far, far more significant than that and more costly. Listen to what he wants. Do the work you did at first.

Now this I think is very very important. The first love had been active love, but it was activity with a difference. And the command to the church is to repent and then repeat the same kind of activity as

characterized the first love.

Jesus Christ is not interested in mere gushing emotional expressions. The first love had been active love, but it was activity with a difference. And the command to the church is to repent and then repeat the same kind of activity as characterized the first love.

Jesus Christ is not interested in mere gushing emotional expressions. He is anxious to see the activity that is penetrated through and through by vital love. It's not the testimony of the mouth, but it's the expression of my love in life.

That's what he's after. Emotion, my friend, is useless unless it launches the soul into the orbit of obedience and gives quality and feeling to the entire round of common duty. And this is consistent with a whole of biblical truth.

You remember our Lord's threefold question to Simon Peter? Simon, son of Jonas, love his son? Three times the master told him, then if you do love me, do this. Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs.

Feed my sheep. In other words, I'm not concerned, says the master, that you should merely tell me that you love me. It's so easy, especially in an environment such as this.

My good friend, what he wants is this. Remember, repent, and repeat. He wants us to be seeking his grace in such a manner that when we go back from this convention, we may go back as men and women that are utterly and irrevocably dedicated to do the work that once characterized our lives.

And first, love was glowing on the altar of the heart. Has he anything against you this morning? Can it be that the Lord Jesus is underscoring this very word and using my feeble voice to impress it upon your heart and conscience? Let me remind you, it is with a view to a larger blessing, because this will open for you the way to the tree of life again, then to the sweet life-enriching fellowship with the Son of God, in which all the fullness and the plenitude of his grace will be constantly availing for you as you trust in him. Oh, may God grant it.

May the ministry of his word during this day enable us further to abandon the things that are wrong in our lives, and that some of us may recapture what we have long since lost. And all of us rejoice in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel. Let us pray.

Oh, God, our Heavenly Father, we bless thee with all our hearts, that thou art so full of grace and of compassion. We are the recipients of so many favors, favors brought for us with precious blood. And yet, our Father, it is so true of us that in some measure or other we have the fine things so dearly purchased.

We have allowed the evil things of this world to steal our heart's affection. Oh, help us now to set our affection on things above. Lord God Almighty, pursue thy sanctifying ministry within our every heart and life.

Continue the work that thou hast begun, and grant that we may adorn the doctrine of Christ with a life that is lived in the fullness of the provision of thy grace. Till that end, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit remain with us all, now and always. Amen.

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