

Arresting the Downward Trend

by Zac Poonen

The sermon warns of the downward trend in churches due to loss of first love, worldliness, and hypocrisy, and emphasizes the responsibility of the messenger to watch their own life and maintain constant anointing of the Spirit.

Scripture: Revelation 2:14

Topics: "Spiritual Decline", "Church Revival"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the downward trend seen in the five messengers and churches rebuked by the Lord in Revelation. From losing first love for the Lord in Ephesus to the decay of the body and spiritual pride in Laodicea, each church represents a different stage of spiritual decline. The messengers were complacent, busy preparing sermons for others while neglecting their own spiritual condition, reminiscent of an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction.

Transcript

In Rev. Chs.2, 3 & 4 when we look at the five messengers and churches that are rebuked by the Lord we see in them a definite downward trend:

(1) In Ephesus, we see the loss of first love for the Lord. When we lose our devotion for Christ, we have taken the first step downwards. In a little while, this leads on to our losing our love for our fellow-believers too.

(2) In Pergamum, we see that worldliness has crept in slyly through the teaching of Balaam. The Nicolaitans (who were kept out of the church at Ephesus) have now got power here. When devotion to Christ is lost, worldliness creeps in and the religious hierarchy takes over the church. Once a religious hierarchy has taken over the leadership of a church, Babylon is built easily.

(3) In Thyatira, the church has become thoroughly worldly, and as a result religious harlotry is rampant. A woman now has power to influence the church, and is proclaiming false grace and counterfeiting the gifts of the Spirit too (prophecy in particular).

(4) In Sardis, we see hypocrisy. Sin is covered up and man's opinion is valued more than God's. The messenger of the church is spiritually asleep (unaware of spiritual realities). The form of godliness however hides from the eyes of men the spiritual death that the Lord sees in him.

(5) In Laodicea, things have degenerated to such an extent that the body has not only died, but also begun to decay and stink. Lukewarmness and spiritual pride are the cause of the death. In the above four churches, there was something good that the Lord could still see in each of them. But here in Laodicea He could see nothing.

None of the messengers of the above churches were aware of the true spiritual condition of their own lives or of their churches. All of them were complacent because of the high opinion they had of themselves. They could not hear what the Lord had to say to them personally, because they were all busy preparing sermons to preach to others. They were more interested in preaching than in seeing their own need. It is very easy, once a person has become the messenger of a church, to imagine that he himself is beyond the need for correction. The Bible speaks of "an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction" (Eccl.4:13). The messengers of these five churches were all like that foolish king. Their word had been law for so long that they could not even imagine the possibility of their now being wrong in any matter!! Such was their deluded state. They imagined that they could never lose the anointing of God from their lives. Their proud attitude was what made them spiritually deaf. King Saul was another foolish king who had started out well but who fell by the wayside very soon. He was "little in his own eyes" when he was first anointed by the Lord as king (1 Sam.15:17). But he did not keep himself in low thoughts about himself. And so he lost the anointing of God. The anointing then moved on to young David. Saul realised this, but he refused to face up to it. He stubbornly continued to sit on his throne and sought to kill David. Finally, God took away Saul's life and put David on the throne. We see similar situations in many churches today. The anointing of the Spirit has departed from many who were once the Lord's messengers, and is now resting powerfully on some younger brothers in their churches. But the "old and foolish kings" cannot bear to see this. So what do they do? Their jealousy and their selfish desire to preserve their kingdoms prompts them to suppress those young brothers in one way or the other.

Perhaps something similar may have been happening in the five backslidden churches of Asia Minor as well. So the Lord gave those messengers one last warning. There is no partiality with God and He has no special favourites. Even the apostle Paul realised that he could fall away and be disqualified if he was not careful to live a disciplined life (1 Cor.9:27). Paul told Timothy, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." (1 Tim.4:16). Timothy had to watch over his own life first of all. He would then be able to experience salvation from un-Christlikeness in his own life and thus be enabled to lead others to such a salvation as well. This is the way the Lord has appointed for all His messengers in every church. Paul told the elders of the church in Ephesus also to watch their own lives first of all and then the lives of their flock (Acts 20:28). This is the responsibility of every messenger of the Lord - to preserve his own life first of all in purity and under the constant anointing of the Spirit. "Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head." (Eccl.9:8). The Lord had wanted to speak to these messengers directly. But they did not have listening ears. Finally He had to speak to them through an apostle. Thank God that there was at least a John who could hear the Lord's voice clearly. In spite of their failures however, the Lord had hope for all five messengers - for He still held them all in His right hand (Rev.2:1). If they repented, they could become glorious brothers once again. And their churches could radiate the glory of the Lord once more. If however they failed to heed this last warning, then the Lord would cast them off.

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