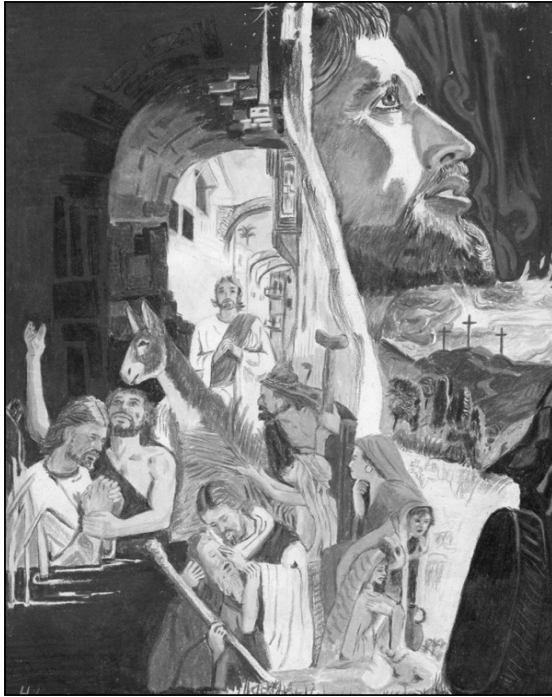


THE WORD – Part VII

Our First Love



We've been talking about our first love for the last year, Jesus, or in the way we know Him today, as the Word of God (John 1). Quite often I meet wonderful Christian folks who never truly understand that the Bible, the Word of God is quite literally Jesus speaking to us right now. Some have no relationship with the Holy Spirit. As a result, many have no relationship with the Word of God. In this type of environment it is quite easy to leave our first love. As a young child I read the Bible quite often. It was a hard book to totally grasp hold of, since I was not baptized with the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking with other tongues. Jesus told us that the Comforter (the Holy

Spirit) was coming after He was leaving in order to lead and guide us into all truth and to speak of Jesus, or to reveal Jesus to us (John 14:16-18, 26). Without a real conviction of our sin as a result of the Holy Spirit, we will not repent from breaking the law. Our sin will always look attractive to us, as is evidenced by thousands of people sitting in church every Sunday but hating their brothers and sinning before the next Sunday shows up. Without the Holy Spirit revealing the Scriptures to us, it doesn't take long for sweet-looking Christians (in all forms and positions), to look and act no differently than the world. Oh, but when the Holy Spirit grabs a hold of you and you realize that no matter how good you are, no matter how many wonderful things you have done for your 'religion' or church or fellow man, all of that is as nothing because you have broken God's law, even from birth. With that kind of conviction you start to groan inwardly and inaudibly for the sin you have committed. You cry out for salvation and for the real Jesus Christ to come and make you right again. This experience is no different for the 'sweet,' gossiping church leader (or 'Christian') as it is for the down and out, the drugged-up or the drag-queen ravaged. We all come to the cross the same way. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, we grieve and repent. We want to be clean. The Holy Spirit draws us into a relationship with Jesus Christ---the living Word of God. At that point the Word becomes like food to a famine-stricken child. The Holy Spirit's presence as you read, pray and worship becomes like water to a desert-bound traveler.

Truly Jesus, the Word, becomes your first love. Oh, you love your family, your spouse, your children and friends---but Jesus now takes a place before all of them existed. You don't ignore them because the possibility that they could go to hell for their sins is real. But there is almost a multi-faceted dimension of love that has been opened up in your spirit man. You love Christ like you love nothing else---and you love Him as the Word and obey the Word as you would a mother, father or other elder. This multi-faceted function of the Word of God is evident all throughout the Scriptures. In fact, it is an extension of the nature of the Godhead itself. As a continent, Europe understood this hundreds of years ago. As a result, there were many revivals among them. But slowly, and almost imperceptibly, that ground-shaking relationship with the Holy Spirit and that awesome love-covenant with Jesus began to ebb. You no longer saw the miracles, the signs and the true prophetic utterance. Their services became cold and dull. Their evangelism became nonexistent. We are not far behind on this continent. In fact, in Canada, they view people who believe in Jesus Christ quite suspiciously. In many regions of America, it is rude to even mention Jesus' name as a positive discourse. What has happened to us? What will become of us? The answer to that question is historical. The answer to the first one is easier. We have lost our first love. Many don't even know that America was founded because of a desire to worship Jesus in total freedom.

This month I sensed the Lord want to talk about our first love and the extension of that love relating to the Word of God. He gave me Revelation 2---the whole chapter, as a pattern for the last 20 years (and if there is no change, the next 20 years). Before we look at our Scripture passage, let me lay a firm foundation for applying Revelation 2 to our timeframe. The Word of God is multifaceted as well as eternal and timeless. There are many who will only interpret the book of Revelation in the future. They refuse to look at the lessons the book might pose for our own place in history. This is sad when you consider how many lessons might be learned by taking heed to the warnings in the book itself (Revelation 1:3). While the Revelation of Jesus Christ given to the Apostle John has a future application, it can also speak to where you and I live in the here and now. This is true of all Scripture.

When Isaiah prophesies that a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, we can see the multifaceted nature of the Word of God. That one word carries no time boundaries---except for those that God Himself places on it. Let me explain. The word that Isaiah uses for 'virgin' does not necessarily translate that way. He uses the word *almah*. The rabbis broke human life into eight categories or time frames. *Almah* represented that time frame in a woman or young girl's life of 12 or so to 15 or so. The exact ages are not set in stone because this stage of life had to do with that period of time of being kept secret. It is a time of early adulthood, when the strength and/or beauty of an individual was veiled or kept hidden. You did not yet see

what they would become. For a woman, this could be just before marriage, during espousal or in the very early stages of marriage. For us today that age may be 16 to 23. For the ancients it started younger. It translates to the words handmaiden, damsel, lass, and in our understanding, virgin. This was also true then, only this word could also apply to a young bride who might actually be pregnant as well as a young, unmarried teenager (who were all kept as virgins). Now let's apply this understanding to what Isaiah wrote about. He is told by the Word of the Lord that an *almah* shall conceive and bare a son. Well, for Isaiah to be considered a true prophet, his word better come to pass. Sure enough about a year later Isaiah's wife (or *almah*) conceives and has a son. This is the first or initial fulfillment of this word. The next fulfillment of this word (or as some theologians call the anticipatory fulfillment of this word) is when an actual virgin named Mary (or Miriam in the Hebrew) conceives and bares The Son. Fast forward to the virgin bride of Christ here on earth as she lives in relationship to her espoused groom, Christ. She is always reproducing sons unto God (2 John). This would be considered the progressive fulfillment of the Word of the Lord spoken to Isaiah. At last we have the final or cumulative fulfillment of this word when Christ comes back to earth as the Son of Righteousness, the King, taking His spotless bride with Him---that virgin bride has reproduced Christ here in substance on earth as God wraps this age up (Revelation 22:16,17). Think about this the next time you read a portion of Scripture in which

there may be more than one fulfillment of a word.

Another example of this is found in the book of Revelation when John says that he is in the Spirit on the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). To most of us this is the Sabbath day of God's rest. Yet we are told that every day is the Lord's Day; that He has made each day new with a fresh visitation from Him (Psalm 118:24; Matthew 6:11; Hebrews 4:6-13). Then we have specific days of His coming or of His wrath or judgment (Micah 5:9-15; Isaiah 13, here is an example of that multi-faceted word). Then we have the last fulfillment of the Day of the Lord as the literal day of His final judgment on the earth (Acts 17:31). Quite frankly, because we know that Jesus is alive in heaven, we know His word is living here on earth. Not every word has multifaceted applications, but many do. The reason for this is the fact that the Word is alive. The reason this can be applied to us is because we are the bride of Christ and He is our first love. It is as we begin to leave that love relationship that His word and His ways become dry to us and we lose our footing. There is a pattern to this, just like the Lord has a pattern for everything He does. If we apply the pattern over dry love, it is a form. When we are in love with Jesus, the pattern is only sketch work or paperwork. It's nice, but it is seen for what it is. When we live by patterns, we die. When we live by Christ's life, we move in a flowing and breathing exuberance of days. We then realize that there was a form, though the cutouts might have been the same, the eventual weave was slightly

different than what we read in the Scriptures or saw in someone else's life. For example, the pattern of being dead to sin is just as it was for Jesus. Yet Jesus was totally without sin. None of us can claim that until we have experienced a death to a pattern of sinning in our lives. While Christ died literally for us, we die experientially to a life of sin.

With that as the foundation for our study of Revelation 2, let's look at the first church Jesus speaks to. "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 lamp stands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at the first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place. But you have this in your favor: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:1-7)

For those who would limit this to just Ephesus or just a certain church age or just a church in the future, I would draw your

attention to the words, "let him hear what the Spirit says to the CHURCHES." While applying this to Ephesus, a certain church age or churches in the future is not wrong, the Scripture is clear that ALL churches need to pay attention to these words. This refrain: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," is repeated to every single church mentioned in chapters 2 & 3. We cannot isolate ourselves from what the Spirit is saying to these specific churches. Next let's look briefly at the city of Ephesus itself where this church was located and see if there is a pattern with your city, my city or where we live. The city of Ephesus was almost co-equalled with the capitol of Asia, for a number of reasons. It was a gateway that opened Asia up to the rest of the world. It was also considered the head or birthplace of emperor worship. Located at the mouth of the Aegean Sea on a river that served as a caravan route from Palestine and Syria, Ephesus was the worldwide center for the cult worship of the goddess Diana, or Artemis as was its Roman/Greek name. This is what they were warring against as Christians in an effort to rid the world of demonic influence so God in glory could rest and infiltrate. This cult held large sway over all of Asia. Sir William Ramsey in his work, "The Letters to the Seven Churches," (digital version published by Christian Life School of Theology, Columbus, GA, 2002; see chapters 17 & 18) writes concerning the history of Ephesus itself. It was a city that was located on the sea with a river. If you look at a modern map today, you would not see that. Today it looks as if it is landlocked. This is why he

and many other scholars call it the city of change because the sea and land were constantly changing Ephesus' dynamics. Originally this cult goddess was associated with the mountains and nature. She was symbolized by the bee. So much so that coins and other artifacts were all emblazoned with the bee as a strict symbol of the city of the queen-mother goddess. Ephesus was also a 'first' city. What I mean by that is that her location placed her as the first port of entry for Asia and the Roman governmental officials. (Thus its birthplace of emperor worship) As the sea rescinded, silting the river valley, Ephesus became more of a land-locked place. As she was losing her harbor, the Emperor Caracalla made an edict proclaiming Ephesus as the first port of entry for Roman ships. This custom or legend, as it became, was inscribed onto a coin during Phillip's reign in AD 244-248. Eventually Smyrna became the port city because of the loss of Ephesus' harbor, which is where our next church that we will study is located. But the custom of declaring Ephesus the first landing was continued.

Before this time, though, the great goddess-queen-mother evolved into a virgin-hunter-goddess and her animal, the stag became another symbol (as well as the bee). During this evolving process, she was called Artemis, the huntress. Since Greeks did not associate their gods with animals, and as their influence overtook Ephesus, there was an attempt to wipe out the references to bees and stags from the association of Artemis. But old traditions don't usually die among

the native people, and the Greeks had to acquiesce to the native traditions as they minted the coinage of the day. It's also interesting to note in Ramsey's literature, that all the religious activity, which eventually included Christian activity, centered on one hill located in Ephesus. This was called the holy hill. As Artemis was a huntress, the bow was a prominent part of her entourage. Because of its harbor, Ephesus curved like a bow with two points; Pion on the east and the Hill of Astyages on the west. I find it very interesting that this obvious geographic symbol was literally washed away by the hand of the one true God, Yahweh. We have not talked about the obvious, which was the wealth of this city. Being a first port and the center for Persian, Greek and eventually Roman financial blessings as well as religious activity, Ephesus acquired much wealth throughout her changing geographic dynamics. This made any religion centered in Ephesus also quite wealthy.

I've gone into this brief overview of ancient Ephesus to give you an idea of its roots and what exactly it was that the church located in the city was living among. Maybe you can see some of your own city in this history. I certainly see some elements of the one I work out of. Let's look at what Jesus says to them. The first thing that strikes me in each letter to each church is that who Jesus declares Himself to be is in exact juxtaposition to what will be their reward when they overcome. Here He is the one who is over the angelic, human governmental and revelatory hierarchy of

the church, holding the stars in His right hand (the hand of Kingship and governmental authority) and He walks easily, it would seem from the passage, among the lamp stands, or what He has positioned in the churches to give light and revelation. Jumping quickly to the end of the passage we read that the over comers of this particular group will eat and gain sustenance of the very fruit of life, from the tree of the same name, in a place that is termed, God's paradise. My thought here is fellowship with Christ, on a daily basis means He walks among us in revelation, holding all government in His hand. We are thus safe because of the right hand of His provision as we dwell in His paradise (Mark 16:15-19; Ephesians 2:4-7, 19-22). Our sustenance is not based on external financial markets. Our vision of the future is not based on the amount of religious (that includes Christian) revelation we have. It is based on Him who holds sustenance and light, divine authority and complete power (the number seven symbolizing divine completion) in His right hand.

Immediately Jesus begins to speak of what they have done since their formation as a church on earth. Their past history is also indicative of the city they are in. Their deeds seem to have been good, since He makes no allusion to them not being good. Their hard work for His kingdom and their absolute steadfastness (perseverance) in that work are commended---even to the point of mentioning the hardships they endured for The Name. I know of many churches today that would be extremely blessed to hear

Jesus say that about them. He says something else that is very interesting, at least to me. He talks about testing apostles to see whether they be true or false. For the last 15 years I've been hearing many in the church talk about apostolic ministry. Yet we still see very few apostles---those men and women who plant many different churches in different places (though it warms my heart to see the numbers growing). Let's go back in time to Paul's epistle to the younger Ephesian church. It is in this letter that Paul stresses the need for fivefold ministry and he lays down the foundation for what and how fivefold ministry should function as well as the goals for the body of Christ that they should accomplish. It is also in the letter to the Ephesians that Paul discusses some attributes of spiritual warfare. We know that they must have accomplished something in the spirit realm because they had a flourishing church---not an easy accomplishment in a place that was the Asian stronghold of the goddess-queen-mother cult as well as Roman emperor worship. The spiritual warfare must have been intense---they paid for it with their lives. I have a feeling that the attributes that Jesus commends them for are the same ones that helped them to overcome the spiritual forces in that location. It's interesting that Jesus talks about testing apostles and finding out what they are made of. We hear very little of this today. It's obvious to me that Paul's letter to them years before laid the foundation for what an apostle (as well as other fivefold minister) should do for the body. As opposed to being a bishop (one who oversees or helps other pastors), an

apostle is one who is sent out (usually with a prophet or as a husband and wife team). They start other churches and they instinctively know what spiritual forces are plaguing God's people and how to get rid of them. You can read Ephesians 4 for yourself. There are eleven accomplishments that one should see an apostle do for the churches (as well as other fivefold ministers). We also know from Paul's other letters that reproduction is important for any fivefold minister. After all, it is Paul who said even if they had many teachers, they had only one father in the Gospel, and that was Paul (1 Corinthians 4:15). As well, one would expect the test also had to do with suffering, especially for the early church. Although persecution has a way of purifying the body of Christ in any generation, the early church would have needed to see that someone was real enough to put their life on the line, not on the payroll. It has been recorded that all martyrs coming from that portion of the world would go through Ephesus, straight to Rome (to be used in the 'games'). It would make sense that many other Christians, both real and not, would also pass through that route.

Jesus commends the Ephesians for testing these people in an effort to keep the church pure. After all, He is returning for a spotless bride. There is a Biblical principle of what is true for the part is true for the whole. While Ephesus was not the whole of Asia, what went on in Ephesus could well be viewed as what was going on similarly across Asia. It's also interesting to note that of the churches with problems, Jesus uses more language

commending the Ephesians than the others. Even though Jesus commends them, He uses strong language in the next sentence when He says, "Yet I HOLD this against you: You have forsaken your first love." The word hold used here is a different word from what is used in the beginning of the passage when Christ says that He holds the seven stars in His right hand. That word has to do with security, strength and authority. This word, combined with the word against, conveys the meaning of a strong position in opposition to someone or some thing. He then mentions the word FIRST love. How interesting that the first church of the first city should lose its first love. How did it happen? They were working so hard. Let me quote Sir William as he quotes from a letter written by Ignatius, (the bishop of Syria) during the beginning of the second century: "I ought to be trained for the contest by you in faith, in admonition, in endurance, in long suffering..." (see previous footnote, chapter 18). This was written about 5-15 or so years after John wrote. Most scholars agree that Ignatius had not read John's work. He is talking about receiving emissaries from Ephesus, as he understands he will be heading to Rome for torture in the games (martyrdom). It's obvious that from the outside looking in, the Ephesian church was well received and had worldwide status among Christian circles. What Jesus saw as the problem 5 to 20 years earlier is not evident to the naked eye.

It is the naked eye or more particularly, our focus that I feel is the real problem with the loss of our love. Jesus talks about the tree of

life. Life itself gives sight to the soul. It was in the Garden of Eden that eating from another tree brought the opening of a different kind of sight to mankind and the closing of the eye of the Lord in their midst. After eating from the tree they were commanded not to eat from, they no longer had the same face time (eye to eye) with God that they had before. Why else do I believe their focus or 'face time' was redirected from Christ? Because of what Jesus says He will do if they do not develop the same love, passion and devotion to Him that they had before: He will remove their lamp stand. Clearly, such language goes back to our understanding in the tabernacle and temples of Israel. Yet this was a Hellenistic church at this point, so their understanding would not focus entirely upon Jewish tradition. A lamp stand is something that gives light and enables sight---not cloudy vision but true point of contact to what you are looking at. Because Ephesus was such a city of change, they would have clearly understood this warning as their source of revelation will be moved to another location (which many historians regard as taking place with Smyrna). This should be a clear warning to us also. It wasn't that Ephesus was a bad church---they were well known and well respected---it was that they lost focus on Jesus. I believe their good works, their devotion, and their good name blinded them from realizing the time of their visitation from the Master. Here He was walking among the lamp stands and they were too busy to notice. Their excellence was now their source for vision. This is such a subtle change. I can imagine

all the 'good prophets' coming among them to give 'good and encouraging' words. If one actually came in and warned them as John had done, before they received John's letter, they might have 'tested' that prophet or apostle right out of the church!! The scary thing is that this is so imperceptible, especially when God in glory abides and has left a deposit of His presence. Jesus gives a clear and concise remedy: Repent. Unfortunately this is easier said than done. Every church has a schedule to keep and doubtless so did Ephesus. My advice to people when I perceive this is the word of the Lord for them, slow down, stop and listen to the silence. What I mean by that is stop the music and the other nonsense and start spending hours listening to the Lord. Fasting, prayer and especially praying in tongues---worship and praise will refocus our attention on our First Love.

Let me share with you how simple and easy it is to lose our First Love when our focus is on church, job, us or something not centered by Christ. Quite awhile back I had an experience in which the Lord let me know that certain people in a church I had visited would demote certain other people in the church. He let me know that they viewed what the demoted leaders were doing as retarded or not normal (those were the concepts He gave me). He passed no opinion and gave me none as to what His desires were except to say that He viewed no child of His as retarded or abnormal and that no matter what man did, His will would be done; and that was it. I didn't really know why He gave me this information. About

seven months later I got a phone call from one of the leaders in this church. In passing they mentioned the demotions and let me know that a better order would be instilled and that there would be better organization with new leaders. It was when they mentioned that it was God's will that I almost told them what the Lord had told me. I felt checked by the Holy Spirit to keep quiet. It was then that I realized what God was trying to show me---as if I wanted more lessons in that classroom!!! I understood afresh the difference between Godly vision and human vision as it mixes with what it calls 'God.' When God speaks there are some things that He stresses when He says them that you never forget. What was emphasized to me when He told me of these changes was that they were instituted by man, and not by God. He would allow them because they fit in with His eventual plan. Yet this very sweet leader knew how much God was in all of it and how good it was all going to be. When I got off the phone I had to shake my head in sadness---not because the church was wrong or bad, but because their vision was on something else. When the Lord first spoke with me my focus was not church but Jesus. So it was easy to see man's motives and desires and also easy to realize God's will. It was easy for me to hear the word of the Lord and see how not like Jesus' character the whole situation was and how much it smelled of man's plans---and yet God was going to go along with it (for whatever period of time) because it would all eventually effectuate His plans.

It is not for us to judge the body of our Lord, so we have no idea how close any church or any person is to losing their First Love. It's possible that the Ephesian church was not as close as some of our churches are today. By most historical accounts the Ephesian Christians did not move from their city until early in the fourth century (or late in the third). This is some 400 years after John wrote The Revelation. Today if a prophet warned a church in the height of their accomplishments as did John, that individual would be considered false. The early church had a history and a timeframe for revelation that very few function in today. In our modern time, if a word doesn't come to pass the following month, that individual is considered false---never mind 400 years. This is why the Word of the Lord has its own timeframe and fulfillments and this is why we must stay so close to Jesus, the Word, so as not to miss the times and seasons of His arrival. After this warning Jesus commends the Ephesians again. He tells them that they have this on their side: they hate those that practice idolatry and heresy (the Nicolaitans were such a sect), as does He. He then gives them an awesome promise when they repent and become real again and grab hold of Him like they did when they were young. He tells them that they will have the right to eat from the tree of Life. We have already talked about this somewhat, but in Revelation 22:2 & 14 we see that it is down the middle of the great street of the city as the river flows that the tree of life stood on each side. The similarity could not have been lost on the Ephesians. Sir William Ramsey notes in his work

(previously footnoted, see page 170) that Austrian excavators found a “great street” that ran from the harbor (which at that time had both sea and river) to the base of the Pion. It passed a great theatre and had magnificent buildings on each side. In the Bezan text of Acts 19:28 it mentions a street in Ephesus that the rioting guild-smiths ran onto, complaining about Paul and his companions. It was from this street that they easily found a large place---the theatre the Austrians excavated---to gather and argue about Paul’s philosophy. This street was the mega-main street, the entrance-way-to-everything street of its day. They would have understood the nature of the tree of life on each side of the river with the great street in the middle as John mentions later on in the book. This must have excited them that something similar was in heaven. And that by turning and looking intently at Jesus, not at any other situations, but squarely at Jesus, their vision would be restored and they would eat from the Divine table, that fruit which would heal the nations.

This promise is not far off. If ‘working’ for God has gotten you beat and all you do is serve, serve, serve with little or no encouragement, let me encourage you with these words, get back in love with Jesus again---even to the point that nobody needs to see your face. You don’t need to be seen in ‘church,’ you need to be seen face to face by Jesus. It’s not as hard as it sounds. The same way you came to believe in Him is the same way your love can be restored. For those of you that are pastors and you can’t take a small number of days or week(s)

away from people, the phone and family, try stealing away hours instead. It is possible that an alarm clock of some kind on the wrist or elsewhere can let you know the time, along with strict warnings not to interrupt your prayer time, will benefit more than you can imagine. I knew of one pastor who used to lock himself in the bathroom! While that is a bit drastic, sometimes drastic times require drastic measures. The fact remains that God gives us warnings when things don’t look so bad to us. The reason for this is because we can change, and that’s an awesome word of hope. If it was hopeless, why would He bother? But it’s never hopeless and it’s never too late to fall in love with Jesus all over again. Like the beginning of any love relationship, all you do is spend time together. That’s how you get back in love. Start with spending time. Slow down and listen---stop the noise. Trust me, it works. Be blessed in Jesus’ love. Log on next month for more.....

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