

Recall, Repent, Return

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REVELATION 2:4-5

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 first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Today let us consider something that our Lord said to the great church in Ephesus. The apostle John writes that he was "in the Spirit" on the Lord's Day, and it was at this time that Jesus appeared to him. However, his appearance was no longer that of a lowly carpenter. Rather, we now see him in his glorified form. His eyes were like blazing fire, his feet like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters (1:14-15).

When John saw him, he fell at his feet as though dead (1:17). This is reminiscent of how the prophets were struck down when they saw the manifestation of God, as if overwhelmed by his glory and power. We are aware, then, that when Jesus speaks we are hearing from no one less than God himself. When he first came, he was sent to suffer and to die, but now he has been exalted, never to die again. Man can no longer spit on him, strike him, or crucify him, but now he can only be feared and worshiped. In his mad zeal, Saul of Tarsus persecuted and killed his disciples, but when Jesus appeared to him in a light from heaven, Saul fell to the ground and whimpered, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:3-5).

Perhaps you are one of those who have mocked him, slandered him, and even referred to the history of his redemption as myths and fables. When his servants declared to you the truth about him and demanded your repentance, you cursed them and laughed at them. You have opposed them to their faces, and you have done all that you could to hinder their work.

This Glorified One is coming after you. Do not expect a humble peasant with a sheep under his arm, who would suffer your insults and abuse. But he is GOD, full of terrifying glory and power. He has marked you even now, and he will come after you. At a time of his choosing, he will take your life, and he will throw you into a lake of fire, where he will torture you forever and ever. You will curse him, and he will laugh at you. You will beg him to annihilate you, but he will ignore your pleas. He will sustain your existence so that you will suffer all the extreme agony that he has in store for you, and that he will inflict upon you in all its intensity through eternity.

This is the fate of everyone who does not worship Jesus Christ. You exclaim, "This is cruel and unusual punishment!" But you have been cruel to his people, and now he gives you your just reward. And it is hardly unusual, as you will have millions of companions in hell, too many for you to count. But take no comfort in this, as none of them will have even a second of rest from their suffering to help alleviate yours.

Jesus introduces himself as "him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands" (v. 1). He walks among the churches, examining them, evaluating them. What a delusion it is to think that our Master is gone, so that we may rule as kings in his absence, and that we should eat, drink, and be merry, neglecting the work that he has given us. There is one who watches. There is one who judges.

He sends word through the apostle John to seven churches, and in every message he declares, "I know" (2:1, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). He is the one who knows. He is the one who sees. His knowledge is complete, and his judgment is fair. Many churches and believers today act as if he does not know. Why, do you think that you can undermine God's sovereignty and get away with it? He knows! Do you think that you can play down the doctrines of the blood atonement and an exclusive salvation, and not be held accountable? He knows! What? Do you really think that you can approve of the sodomite and not suffer judgment?

To those who joined with Jezebel, he declares, "I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead" (2:22-23). To what end? "Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds" (v. 23). No one can cheat him; no one can outsmart him. Rhetoric has no effect on him; false compassion cannot confuse him. He is one who searches hearts and minds, and he knows your infidelity.

Do you marvel at my boldness of speech? Oh, do you not understand? You are nothing. It is because I fear *him* that I speak thus, and say to you, "You vile unbelievers, you contemptible non-Christians – repent or be damned, believe or be destroyed."

He commends the believers for their "hard work and perseverance" (v. 2). He knows that they would not "tolerate wicked men," and that they "tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (v. 2). They were committed to maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy, and they stood firm even against opposition, for the Lord says that they "endured hardships" for his name, and they "have not grown weary" (v. 3).

But then comes a word of correction and rebuke: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." Wicked men and false apostles have not become extinct. Those churches that endeavor to remain true to sound doctrine even in the face of opposition must demonstrate great discernment, strength, and commitment. The danger is in making warfare rather than worship our main business. For many believers the chief end of man is not to love Christ but to hate the antichrist, not to promote truth but to denounce heresies. The thrust of their preaching is not dogmatics but apologetics. Their agenda is not worship but warfare. There are entire ministries founded upon the mission to tell the world what *not* to believe. Their work is almost entirely negative.

This is not a natural consequence of orthodoxy, or of studying biblical doctrines, since these very doctrines command us to be fervent in prayer, zealous in good works, and to be increasing in faith and love. Nevertheless, our interest right now is not in discovering why believers forsake their first love, but in what they must do after it has happened. We summarize our Lord's instruction in three words – recall, repent, and return.

You must first *recall* your former condition and compare it to the present one. Has there been a decline in love, in zeal, in fervency? You were so glad to enter the house of the Lord, but now you are relieved to escape it. You had bellowed out his praises in hymns and spiritual songs with tears streaming down your face, but now you are afraid to look like a charismatic. "But I am faithful in attacking error," you say. Yes, but whereas it used to be that indignation for God's honor boiled up from within you and the zeal for his house consumed you, now you are more concerned to demonstrate your own intellectual superiority, and to defend the idol theologians you follow.

You used to rush home every night after work so that you could enter your closet of prayer, to read a sermon or two, or even to attend a church meeting. But now you would rather watch a football game on television, and glory in other people's silly achievements. Then, when the Spirit speaks and the conscience strikes, you retreat to the old reliable excuse, "There is to be no distinction between the sacred and the secular." Right, and you certainly practice what you preach.

Remember the height from which you have fallen!

After that, you must *repent*. Admit that you have fallen. Admit that you have sinned. Confess to the Lord your negligence, your unfaithfulness, and your arrogance. Confess that you have forsaken your first love and have called the world your friend. Oh yes, you have been unrelenting in testing false apostles, exposing false prophets, and refuting false teachers, but it is as if you have forgotten the first principles of the faith of Jesus Christ, and that someone has to teach them to you all over again.

Confess, turn around, and advance toward the opposite direction. Lay aside the heavy things that would hinder you, and get back into the race, looking toward Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith. Transform your entire thinking and attitude, and condemn your own excuses. Plead with the Lord for forgiveness and restoration. Beg him to revive your heart by his Spirit.

Then, *return* to your first love and your first works, and regain your former faith, holiness, and zeal. Return to the house of the Lord with gladness and thanksgiving. Rejoice in hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs. Let the teachings of Christ dwell in you richly. Follow the Lord into battle, but first let him teach you to worship in spirit and in truth. Obey your leaders, and pray that even the simplest truths that the Lord speaks through them will move you to contrition and to action. Be zealous, and harden not your hearts.

Jesus did not give the Ephesians a mere suggestion, but he gave them a command followed by threat. He warns, "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." He regarded the problem as so serious that it warranted decisive action against the congregation. The Lord is building his Church, and he is active among his people. He is not waiting passively and helplessly for things to go his way – things *are* going his way. When believers prosper and walk in truth, when they suffer persecution and hardships, and even when congregations compromise and apostatize, these all come about by his design and his power. He holds the churches in his hands, and nothing is beyond his control. He is one who knows, one who speaks, and one who acts.

Some of you have never fallen from any spiritual height. No, I am not referring to those of you who have kept your love burning and strong toward Christ. But I am talking to those of you who have never fallen because you have never attained anything! You have never even started. Jesus tells the church, "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" But when you try to remember, do you recall anything? Has there ever been a time when you affirmed sound doctrine and denounced heresies? Has there ever been a time when you could not tolerate wicked men, and tested those who claim to be apostles and found them to be liars? Some think the problem was that the Ephesians remained orthodox but became cold in their faith. But you have never attained even this!

Try to remember. Has there ever been a time when you were overwhelmed with the love of God for you, and your love for him? Through sin and neglect, some have allowed their love to grow cold, but have you loved at all?

Try to remember. Has there ever been a time when even a casual reading of a Bible passage would cause your heart to burn? Has there ever been a time when you were so anxious to visit the house of worship that it made your toes curl and your palms moist? Have you ever hungered for the word of God to a point that your heart ached with anticipation, so that you yearned for it as a deer pants for water? Have you ever experienced such an intense desire to commune with God that you would rather forgo your supper to spend just a little more time in prayer?

Try to remember. Have you ever felt mercy in your heart where there was once hatred? Peace where there was once turmoil? Love where there was once greed and lust? Humiliation where there was once self-righteousness?

Dear friends, try to remember, for if in your destitute spiritual condition you cannot recall having lost any of the things that I have described, then you have never been a believer at all. When have you ever been eager to worship, fervent in prayer, zealous for good works, and jealous for God's honor? When? Can your friends and family testify to it? You cannot just wish your way into the kingdom. You must be born into it. And if God has ever implanted into you spiritual life, this is something that can never die. Where is the fruit of it in your life?

If there is something for you to remember at all, then recall, repent, and return. You have forsaken your first love, but God has chosen you for himself and will not forsake you. Repent and return, and he will restore you. But if there is nothing for you to recall, then know that you have never been given life in the spirit. You have never forsaken your first love because you have never loved first. You are still dead in your sins, and God's wrath remains upon you. Repent now, believe the gospel, and you will be saved. For if Christ is so firm with his church, what do you think he will do to you, if you fail to repent (1 Peter 4:17)?

Therefore, whether you are a believer who has fallen from your former spiritual height, or whether you have never been a believer at all, Christ's word to you is "repent." In this is your salvation; in this you will find compassion. May the Lord who watches and judges also grants you repentance. May God have mercy on us, so that we will not harden our hearts, but that we will forsake our sins and obey the gospel. May he show us great kindness, so that he will restore us, and make us love him even more than before.