

#275 "To Lose Your First Love"

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Coming to Christ as He really is is like going from eating fast food to eating a homemade feast. It is like going from drinking polluted water to water as pure as the Garden of Eden. It is like the moment a man meets the woman he is going to marry and the whole rest of the world loses its color. As the old hymn says, when believers turn their eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face, the things of this earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. But for too many believers these words are empty, hollow, and unrealized. Perhaps they wonder if His face is really that wonderful. They have lost their first love, for perhaps they have been deceived, confused, led astray by sin, or left to flounder with an incomplete understanding of the grace and unconditional love of God. Repentance from sin is essential, but ultimately repentance is needed in relation to their warped view of God. A confused or incomplete view of God is like a false image, and it ought not to be followed or bowed down to. We need to see God as He is. As 1 John 3:2b says, "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is."

Revelation 2:1-7 is the account of Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus. He had many compliments for them, for they were faithful in doing good deeds, in persevering in righteous service, in abhorring evil, in contending for truth, in standing against false teachers, and in not growing weary in doing good. But after the compliments came a heavy exhortation. Jesus said to the Ephesian believers in Revelation 2:4-5, "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent." The truth that emerges immediately is that what God wants more than anything from His children is love, adoration, respect, and worship. Kingdom service is good, and Jesus commended them for the good that they were doing. **But even though they had not grown tired of their devotion in service, it appears that they had grown tired of delighting in God Himself.** Perhaps God became boring to them, or maybe they lost their fervor for worship or their love for the lost. It is certainly possible to keep going to church services, signing up for various service opportunities, and even singing worship songs and to fail to worship God in the heart. God's eyes roam the earth looking not at a checklist of participation and volunteerism but at the hearts. He wants hearts that are wholly devoted to Him, and these He will support (2 Chronicles 16:9). He cannot support, endorse, or take joy in hearts that are not near to Him even if they are geographically present in a church building. Eternal life is knowing Christ, not merely knowing about Christ (John 17:3). It is a living, breathing, dynamic, spiritual relationship with the God of the universe. Thus, it is imperative that believers see Him as He is and love Him with all of their heart, mind, and strength. This is the first and greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-38), and as God's love overflows the believer's heart into love for others, the entire intent of the Old Testament Law is fulfilled (Matthew 22:39-40).

As believers, to live is Christ (Philippians 1:21) because Christ literally lives out His life, desires, and intentions through the redeemed, albeit imperfect, heart of the believer (Galatians 2:20). It is a new

heart (2 Corinthians 5:17) that has the capacity for good, for growth, and for sanctification. It is not the old heart that was doomed to evil, to deception, and to sin and failure (Colossians 3:3-4). All things have become new for the believer, and this vibrant connection with God should be driven by love (2 Corinthians 5:14). To regain one's first love in Christ is to see deeper than before how pure and deep His love is, and it is to submit to Him and wait upon Him to change and form the heart's desires to delight in Him fully. This is why those who delight in the Lord will find that He gives them the desires of their hearts (Psalm 37:4). **Their ultimate desire comes to be for Him because they see Him as worth delighting in.** Believers must not adopt a view of God that says He is powerless and unable to work in their lives each and every day to leave a legacy of goodness and mercy (Psalm 23:6). They cannot afford to believe Satan's lies that He is partial or vindictive in any way as if He rejoices in their sorrow. God, Who tells believers to rejoice in others' joy and to grieve when others grieve, does not Himself grieve at our joy or rejoice in our sorrow. Rather, He is like the father in the story of the wayward who keeps a vigilant watch (Luke 15:20) longing for his wayward son's return and embrace.

The reality is that sometimes believers prefer to try out the pig slop (Luke 15:16) and the devil's poison because they fail to see that their first love in God is better than all the rest that the world has to offer. Then there is also the elder brother of the prodigal son who gets mad at the father's grace to his son. He wouldn't even come in to enjoy the party (Luke 15:28). For some reason, he thought that the father was being unfair or partial to throw a celebration for his son who had come home while he had never left. He had trouble with the concept of grace, for he thought that he had earned the party and not the younger brother. The father's reply to him was telling, for he said that all that the father had was his all along (Luke 15:31). This is the arrow of truth to the heart that has lost its first love. **This elder brother had the treasures and endless spiritual blessings of a relationship with God and all that He provides, and yet he lived like he didn't.** He was angered to see someone who didn't earn the benefits of relationship with his father receive and enjoy the benefits. Yet he was there all the time and failed to enjoy the benefits of grace, for he lived in a state of earning approval, meriting love, and not just enjoying his father's embrace. Only those who appreciate grace can rejoice when others receive it also. He belonged to the father, but he lived as if he wasn't sure of it or as if it was a relationship that was conditional. Too many believers view their relationship with God as conditional, uncertain, distant, or unstable. Though they are part of His family, they fail to enjoy Him for all that He is because they think that they have to work their way into His favor and blessing. Why is it so hard just to bask in His mercy, to enjoy His glory, and to receive His free good and perfect gifts? Grace crushes pride, self-sufficiency, and a merit mentality, and it says just to rest in the Savior and to let Him fill, empower, and strengthen to His glory.

The Ephesians were like the elder brother, minding the shop, so to speak, day in and day out, but they were missing a critical element all the while. God introduced Himself to the Ephesian church by saying that He held them in His hand and walked among them (Revelation 2:1). The subtle inference is that they had forgotten to enjoy the reality of His nearness. The truth is that they belonged to Him, He held their hands, and He wanted them to enjoy His presence, power, and blessing. For some, it takes a complete undoing before they realize that grace is freely received, and they have to realize that they have misunderstood their Father's heart toward them or withheld some of their heart from Him. Others

come to the cross like the lost son broken beyond repair and find grace in Jesus Who binds them up and makes them whole. For others, the deceitfulness of wealth and the difficulties and/or entrapments of this world can sap the initial joy and love for the Savior. Regardless of a person's respective journey to losing his first love, the return and recovery is always the same. They must come to Him as He is, see Him as He is, and stop being too "good," too busy, and too prideful to be desperately needy for grace and a Fatherly embrace. There is no conditionality with God, His grace is sure, His love is without fail, and His relationship is safe. **It is okay to be needy, incomplete, and imperfect. Our first love, Jesus Christ, supplies needs, completes us, and perfects us. Do you know that love?**