

## SESSION 1

# Characterized by Love



### QUESTION 1:

*When have you done something crazy for love?*

## THE POINT

Ground everything you do in love for Christ.

## THE PASSAGE

Revelation 2:1-7

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Everyone has had a first love in life. Do you remember yours? It may have been a childhood crush or a teen infatuation. Some call it puppy love. For some it was very early in life, for others it may have happened later on, and many of us worked hard, maybe even doing crazy things, to get the person to reciprocate and love us back. As I look back on my first love from childhood, it occurs to me that throwing rocks at her to get her to love me may not have been the smartest thing to do!

When you first came to faith in Christ, do you remember how you loved Christ? Unlike a childhood crush, you knew you didn't have to work to receive His love in return. Over time, though, we get busy doing things and may begin to think our work for Him is the most important part of our relationship. As we will see in Jesus' message in Revelation to the church at Ephesus, works cannot replace the need to keep our first love in the right place. We need to return to our first love for Christ.

## Revelation 2:1-3

**1** Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;

**2** I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:

**3** And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

Several years ago a gentleman visited our church and came to faith in Jesus. Before long he was serving in a variety of places around the church. He was a compassionate, kind man who developed a heart of gold when it came to serving. He preferred to serve without people noticing what he was doing. However, after several months, his demeanor began to change because serving no longer brought him the same joy it initially did.

On one occasion, we had a conversation in which I told him how much I appreciated his hard work in helping to make the church a better place. He confessed that, when he first came to know the Lord, he served out of love for Jesus. Along the way, though, he began to think he had to do it because if he didn't no one else would. His service for Christ had morphed into tasks from a to-do list.

### DIGGING DEEPER

#### THE CITIES OF REVELATION 1-3

For more detailed information about the seven cities mentioned in Revelation 1-3, see the article on pages 24-27.

You may want to refer to this article throughout the study as a resource to provide information about the geography, history, and unique features about the seven cities that will provide insights into the message to each of the churches.

A similar situation happened with the church at Ephesus. Ephesus was literally at the crossroads of civilization. Home to the temple of Diana, it was the center for fertility worship. Ephesus was a city that was full of pagan religious options.

The church at Ephesus was full of dedicated people who were serving the Lord and doing their best to stay on course in their relationship with Him in spite of all the evil options and temptations

available to them in the city. Jesus acknowledged the church for their good works and for staying the course. Their perseverance and endurance were commendable. The Ephesian believers were known for their good works.

What we do for Christ and His kingdom matters. We may think our work doesn't matter if no one is watching or acknowledges it, but God sees what we are doing. We need to be known for our good works. Our faithful work points others to Christ. Our faithful service strengthens and builds up the church.

### **Ephesus**

#### **COMMENDED FOR:**

1. WORKING HARD AND PERSEVERING
2. NOT TOLERATING EVIL PEOPLE OR FALSE APOSTLES
3. HATING THE NICOLAITANES

#### **REBUKED FOR:**

1. ABANDONING THEIR FIRST LOVE

### **QUESTION 2:**

***Based on these verses, how would you describe the church in Ephesus?***

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## Revelation 2:4-6

**4** Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

**5** Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

**6** But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.

**KEY WORD:** **Nicolaitanes** (v. 6)—A heretical group that apparently was making inroads in some of the churches in Asia Minor (2:15). Their practices were immoral and idolatrous.

Let's go back to the conversation with the gentleman from my church. As we continued to talk, we discovered he had not grown bitter and resentful of serving because of the lack of recognition. His attitude toward his service had changed because Jesus wasn't his first love anymore. He had forgotten what it was like to serve simply because of his love for Jesus.

Jesus scolded the church at Ephesus for that very thing: they had lost their first love. While they still were doing good things, remaining strong, and staying committed to not tolerating evil, they had replaced their top priority of loving Jesus with a focus on the lists of things they knew they had to do.

Jesus' indictment that the Ephesian church had abandoned their first love is a warning to us. We would benefit from a periodic self-examination. *Have I lost my first love? Have I replaced my love for Jesus with a list of tasks to be done for Him?* We can forget what it was like when we first came to Jesus. The overwhelming sense of love for Christ and what He did for us through His salvation settles in and we start to take it for granted. The Ephesian church had done that. Jesus called them to remember

how far they had fallen. They needed to take a look back to when they first came to Christ and the love they had for him at that time.

Jesus told the Ephesians to repent, turn around, and return to the love they had at first and the works they were doing. Keep in mind that the Ephesian church was a good church, doing many good and commendable things. But any work we do should be done out of love for God and a desire to please Him because of the great gift of salvation He has given to us at the enormous price of His own life. We are to work and serve with a love that keeps Him in first place. Our good works are to grow out of our love for Him.

This message to the Ephesian church mentioned a group of people called the Nicolaitanes. While we don't really know much about this group, we can draw the conclusion that it wasn't good. It is believed they were mixing elements of Christianity with practices and other teachings from the pagan culture that was very much alive in Ephesus. Verse 6 tells us that not only did the church at Ephesus hate the practices of the Nicolaitanes, but so did God. If God hates something, we better sit up and take notice!

When we get our priorities out of order, we no longer are able to share and shine the light and love of Christ effectively to those around us. That's why Jesus told the church at Ephesus He would remove their lampstand unless they repented. In other words, their witness in that community would no longer be one that pointed people to the love of Christ. No longer would their individual lives proclaim their love for Christ through their words or actions.

I can't help but wonder how many churches today (the people of God, not the buildings) are standing in the same place as these early believers in Ephesus. Do we understand how important it is that we honor Christ and love Him with everything we have? Do we understand how that love—or absence of love—impacts our witness and relationships with others? Unfortunately, it is all too easy to get things out of order in our lives, getting lost in serving others out of routine and habit rather than out of love. In those moments, repentance is needed in our lives to keep the main thing

the main thing. For our lives to be characterized by love, our love for Jesus must be kept in first place.

**QUESTION 3:**

*How can we keep love for Christ as the highest priority of our life?*

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**Revelation 2:7**

**7 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.**

Returning to the conversation with the gentleman from my church, he said he had felt for some time that something wasn't right in his life. He concluded that the Holy Spirit had been trying to get his attention, but he hadn't been listening to what the Spirit was trying to tell him. He then asked: "What have I missed out on because I wasn't listening?"

As kids, we likely all experienced times when an adult accused us of not listening. Maybe our parents told us to do something and we didn't do it. Maybe a teacher shared an important piece of information that would help us pass an upcoming test. Maybe a pastor gave a message that would help keep us on track in our relationship with God. If we are honest, all of us at one point or another can be found guilty of not listening. Failure to listen in most any situation brings negative consequences.

Jesus reminded the church at Ephesus to listen to what the Spirit was saying to them. But the truths He taught were not just for them. They are for all who are willing to listen. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Listening

implies more than just hearing the words. Listening means we hear the words and act on them. We see this in relation to God.

**“This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him” (1 John 5:14-15).**

God hears our prayers and acts on them. In turn, as we hear God’s word to us, we are to act on it. As my mom said to me many times as I was growing up, it’s not just about listening to what you are told, it’s then taking what you hear and putting it into action in your life.

The Lord told the church at Ephesus what they were doing was good and honorable. But it wasn’t enough. Their priorities had been turned upside down, and they needed to return to their first love. They were to repent, turn 180 degrees from how they had been living, and return to the love of Christ they had experienced at the very beginning of their relationship with Him.

So what good would come about if they repented and began to apply what the Spirit was telling them to do? They ultimately would dwell as victors with Christ forever. Those who truly followed Christ, not just in words or deeds, but with Christ as their first love, would experience the real victory of Jesus and share in the gift of eternal life that only comes through Him.

One cell phone company used this slogan for many years: “Can you hear me now?” While the company no longer uses it in their ads, I think the words are very appropriate for those who follow Christ and want to keep Him as our first love. When it comes to the Spirit speaking into our lives and asking us “Can you hear me now?” what is your response going to be? Let’s take to heart what we hear in this message and live as conquerors.



**QUESTION 4:**

***What are some ways our church is like the church at Ephesus?***

**QUESTION 5:**

***What are some practical ways our group can demonstrate love to others?***

**ENGAGE**

***Circle the words that describe the way you felt when you first came to know Jesus as your Savior. You can also add your own words to the list. Then answer the question.***

Joy

Love

Excitement

Peace

Adoration

Comfort

Amazement

Satisfaction

Relief

Awe

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

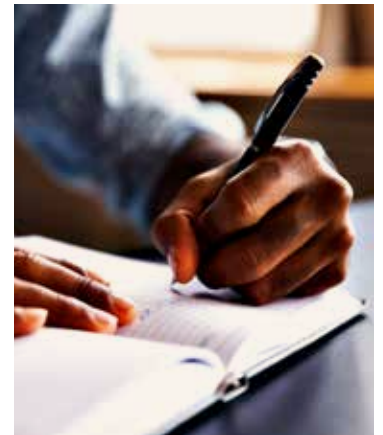
Which of these words apply to you today?

***If necessary, ask the Holy Spirit to renew your love for Christ.***

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## LIVE IT OUT

- ▶ **Listen.** Take some time each day to spend alone with God. Read Scripture, and as you read, ask God to help you hear what the Spirit is saying. Resolve to obey and act on what you read.
- ▶ **Love.** Make a list of ways God has revealed His love to you. Pray and express your love to Him in return. Ask God to help you love Him in return and to keep that love in the forefront of everything you do.
- ▶ **Return.** Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many believers got out of the habit of attending a worship service or Bible study group. With a mind-set of returning to your first love, graciously encourage others to come back to sharing life with the body of Christ through worship and group study.





Overview of ancient Pergamum from the Temple of Athena built in the fourth century BC. The theater is the most prominent structure seen.

## THE CITIES OF REVELATION

By George W. Knight

The seven cities mentioned in Revelation 1–3 are located in the western part of Asia Minor. Located on a major trade route, these cities were in easy reach of each other, and communication between them was common. John’s “Revelation” arrived in Ephesus from Patmos and was delivered to the seven churches along this route.

### **EPHESUS**

John wrote first to Ephesus, the principal city in Asia Minor. The city was founded on the western coast of Asia Minor near the Aegean Sea. Today the city’s excavations are five miles from the Aegean. The prime location of the city made it the main roadway that led to the east on the ancient road system. Roman milestones found in Asia Minor began counting all distances from Ephesus.

Ephesus grew to be the largest trade center in Asia. The city served as the capital of the province of Asia and prospered as a business, religious, government, and education center. A sacred district was set aside for honoring *Dea Roma* and included shrines and temples of Roma, Julius Caesar, the Domitian temple, and the temple of Augustus. A major feature of ancient Ephesus was the temple of Diana, known to the Greeks as Artemis. This temple was known as one of the “seven wonders of the world.” It was burned about AD 262 by the Goths, fell into disuse, and became a stone quarry for other buildings. The only evidences of Ephesus are an archaeological excavation and the small Turkish village of Ayasoluk.

#### **SMYRNA**

Smyrna was located on the western coast of Asia Minor north of Ephesus. It also was situated on the major highway leading from Ephesus north and was the beginning of a major roadway leading into the rest of Asia Minor. Smyrna’s location

gave it many advantages because of the fertile farmland nearby, its access to trade by sea, and easy travel and commerce afforded by the intersecting highways.

In 195 BC, Smyrna became the first city of Asia Minor to establish a temple to the goddess Roma. The imperial cults had a long and continuous history, with the city serving as overseer of the priests for the whole province of Asia. This favorable relationship with Rome brought a “free city” status to Smyrna. Later Smyrna won out over other cities to build a temple to Tiberius. It contested with Ephesus and Pergamum for the title of “first city in Asia,” and Strabo affirmed it as the most beautiful city of all. Smyrna had a large Jewish community that was actively opposed to the Church. This community is seen in Revelation as a “Synagogue of Satan.” In AD 156 Jews led in the condemnation and burning of Bishop Polycarp at age of 86.

#### **PERGAMUM**

The northernmost city of Revelation 1–3 was located

about 15 miles from the Aegean coast. The earliest city was founded on a hill about 1,300 feet high. This location made the city secure when fortified, leading to the name of the city, Pergamum, a Greek word for “fortress.” The modern Turkish city of Bergama is built over that lower city.

The city developed in both culture and education, building one of the greatest libraries of the ancient world. The great library served as a focus for book making, and the fine, thin, tanned animal skin used for writing gained the name “Pergamum sheeting” or “parchment.” Pergamum lost its great library when Mark Anthony gave it to his paramour Cleopatra. During the Roman period the city was an important center for medicine, and religion. The city built a temple to Augustus and Roma and was the first city in Asia to do so. It became one of the most important centers for the imperial cult. The city also boasted of an ancient temple of Asklepios, the god of healing.

### **THYATIRA**

The current Turkish city of Akhisar marks the site of ancient Thyatira situated in the Lycus River Valley. It lies on the road between Pergamum, to the northwest, and Sardis, to the southeast. It was known as a city of trade guilds led by wool and linen merchants, supported by dyers. Other known guilds included coppersmiths, leatherworkers, and tanners.

Inscriptions depict Thyatira as worshiping various deities. The worship of Apollos became related to emperor worship and claimed that the emperor was the earthly form of Apollos and thus the son of Zeus. In Revelation, the description of Jesus as the Son of God likely refutes the claim of the emperor to be the son of Zeus. The depiction of Jesus as having “eyes like flames of fire and feet like burnished brass” may refer to the local statue of Apollos.

### **SARDIS**

On the highway south of Thyatira and east of Philadelphia lies the city of Sardis. It is situated in the Hermus Valley. In AD 17 the

city was severely damaged by an earthquake, but was rebuilt with the financial assistance of emperor Tiberius. It was a city of power, wealth, and influence.

### **PHILADELPHIA**

The ancient city of Philadelphia stood on the site of the modern city of Alasehir in western Turkey. Its ancient location was a fertile, productive farming area yielding many crops, including grapes used for wine. It was situated on the great highway between Sardis and the rest of Asia Minor. This location made it a center of communication and business. The city was almost destroyed by the great quake of AD 17. Philadelphia was aided in rebuilding by Tiberius. Later the city took on the name of several emperors including Vespasian and Domitian. This may be the background of the statement in Revelation 3:12 concerning the believer having on him “the name of My God and the name of the city of My God” (NASB). Philadelphia also suffered when Domitian ordered half of the vineyards of Asia to be destroyed.

### **LAODICEA**

The southernmost of the seven cities, Laodicea was located on the Lycus River at the junction of the highway from Ephesus on the west and from Philadelphia to the north. It was situated on a fertile plateau. The city was subject to earthquakes and suffered major damage in AD 60, but the people refused outside assistance when they rebuilt. The city’s great wealth came from its fertile land, industry, and commerce. The area was well-known for a magnificent black wool used for garments as well as carpets. Another source of income was special medicines made for eye and ear diseases. The eye medicine was kollyrion and was highly prized throughout the ancient world. The city’s commerce led to its becoming a financial and banking center. The city’s water supply was considered inferior and was perhaps the city’s one weakness, when compared to the wonderful cold spring water of Colossae and the therapeutic hot water of Hierapolis.

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