

## RETURNING TO THE ORTHODOXY OF THE CHURCH

(Thursday—Second Morning Session)

Message Two

### The Church in Ephesus

Scripture Reading: Rev. 2:1-7

- I. With regard to the seven churches, which are represented by the seven lampstands, we should understand three things:**
  - A. These seven churches were real churches existing at that time.
  - B. These seven churches represent the sevenfold history of the church.
  - C. The conditions of the churches exist simultaneously in the church's sevenfold history.
- II. Revelation 2 and 3 show us what we need to do to return to the orthodoxy of the church—what it is that actually pleases the Lord, what it is that the Lord condemns, and what the Lord's actual way is for the church:**
  - A. If a man really wants to walk in the Lord's way, he must read Revelation 2 and 3; today the church has problems, so Revelation tells us what to do; if you do not seek the way in these two chapters, you do not know how to be a Christian.
  - B. The seven epistles to the seven churches start with the Lord and end with a call to the overcomers; the overcomers are the normal and ordinary ones; those who are not abnormal during the time of abnormality are the overcomers.
  - C. Today men fall, fail, and go downward continually, but the overcomers are recovered to the will of God and return to the orthodoxy of the church.
- III. There are four main points in the Lord's epistle to the church in Ephesus—love, life, light, and the lampstand—2:1-7:**
  - A. We must not leave the Lord as our first love, and we must do the first works; "but if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent"—vv. 4-5:
    1. The leaving of the first love is the source of and main reason for the failure of the church throughout the ages.
    2. Colossians tells us that our Christ must have the first place in all things; He must have the preeminence—1:18b.
    3. To recover the first love is to consider the Lord Jesus as the first in everything; if we make Christ everything in our life, this means that we have overcome the loss of the first love—cf. Psalms 73:25.
    4. To overcome the loss of the first love is to be constrained by the love of Christ not merely to live for the Lord but to live to the Lord—2 Cor. 5:9, 14-15:
      - a. To live to the Lord means that we are determined to gain the honor of being well pleasing to Him by being absolutely under His control, direction, and governing and that we care uniquely for His aims and goals.
      - b. To live to the Lord means that we are under the Lord's direction and

control and that we fulfill His requirements, satisfy His desires, and complete what He intends.

5. The failure of Israel was that they forsook God, the fountain of living waters (Jer. 2:13), and the degradation of the church is the leaving of the first love; actually, to leave the first love is just to leave Christ, not taking Him as the first in everything.
6. The first love must be to have God, Christ, the Lord, our Master, as the first One in everything—in great things as well as in small things; we need to ask the Lord to forgive us for all the things in which we do not give Him the preeminence.
7. The “first works” are works that issue from the “first love”—Rev. 2:4-5:
  - a. When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), we will surely not be praised for the greatness or volume of our work; what the Lord will investigate is how much of what we do is out of our love to Him.
  - b. Only those works that are motivated by love are the gold, the silver, and the precious stones (1 Cor. 3:12); when the saints are filled with the first love for the Lord, everything they do originates from their love for the Lord and is a “labor of love” (1 Thes. 1:3).
  - c. It is possible that we, like the children of Israel, may worship and serve God, but we may do it mournfully, not at all happy that we are required to do these things—Mal. 3:14.
8. For the Lord to remove the church’s lampstand does not mean that from now on it has no more outward activities or moves; it merely means that it can no longer be God’s faithful testimony:
  - a. If we leave the first love to the Lord and do not repent and do the first works, it is possible that we may still be standing on the ground of locality, but we have lost the reality and testimony of the Triune God as typified by the golden lampstand.
  - b. The removal of the lampstand means that before God the church’s position is lost and that she has lost her testimony, the testimony of Jesus; she has lost her position and is disqualified from being the church of the Lord’s testimony anymore.
- B. If we have the first love toward the Lord, we will hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which the Lord also hates—Rev. 2:4, 6:
  1. The Greek word for *Nicolaitan* is composed of two words, one meaning “conquer” or “be victorious over” and another meaning “common people,” “secular people,” or “laity.”
  2. *Nicolaitans*, then, must refer to a group of people who esteem themselves higher than the common believers; this was undoubtedly the hierarchy adopted and established by Catholicism and Protestantism; the Lord hates the works, the behavior, of these Nicolaitans, and we must hate what the Lord hates.
  3. In the proper church life there should be neither clergy nor laity; all the believers should be priests of God (1:6; 5:10; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9); because the mediatorial class destroys the universal priesthood in God’s economy, the Lord hates it.

- C. In such a good, orderly, and formal church life like the church in Ephesus, we need to maintain the eating of Christ as the tree of life—Rev. 2:7:
1. If we give the preeminence to Christ in everything and enjoy Him as the tree of life every day, we will be marvelous, overcoming Christians, and the church life will become a paradise to us.
  2. God's original intention was that man should eat of the tree of life (Gen. 2:9, 16); because of the fall, the way to the tree of life was closed to man (3:22-24); through the redemption of Christ the way by which man could touch the tree of life, which is God Himself in Christ as life to man, was opened again (Heb. 10:19-20).
  3. But in the church's degradation, religion crept in with its knowledge to distract the believers in Christ from eating Him as the tree of life; hence, the Lord promised to grant the overcomers to eat of Himself as the tree of life in the Paradise of God (the New Jerusalem) as a reward; this is an incentive for them to leave religion with its knowledge and return to the enjoyment of Himself.
  4. This promise of the Lord restores the church to God's original intention according to His economy; what the Lord wants the overcomers to do is what the whole church should do in God's economy; because of the church's degradation, the Lord came to call the overcomers to replace the church in the accomplishing of God's economy.
  5. Eating the tree of life, that is, enjoying Christ as our life supply, should be the primary matter in the church life:
    - a. The content of the church life depends on the enjoyment of Christ; the more we enjoy Him, the richer the content will be, but to enjoy Christ requires us to love Him with the first love.
    - b. If we leave our first love toward the Lord, we will miss the enjoyment of Christ and lose the testimony of Jesus; consequently, the lampstand will be removed from us.
    - c. These three things—loving the Lord, enjoying the Lord, and being the testimony of the Lord—go together.
- D. Love is related to life, and life is related to light; love, life, and light are a trinity:
1. If we make Christ the first in everything, we will have the first love; if we have this love, we have life, and we will enjoy the Lord; if we have life, this life becomes light to us—John 1:4; Phil. 2:15-16.
  2. The light of the lampstand, the church, shines forth corporately versus individualistically in the dark night of the church age—cf. Rev. 2:5b.
- E. If we are enjoying Christ as our love, life, and light, we will keep the testimony of Jesus as the shining of the lampstand in our locality—cf. 12:17b.
- F. We need to remember these four words that begin with the letter *l*—*love, life, light, and lampstand*:
1. We must give the Lord Jesus the preeminence in every way and in everything to recover the first love.
  2. Then we will enjoy Him as the tree of life, and this life right away becomes the light of life—John 8:12.

3. Then we will be shining in our daily life and corporately as the lampstand; otherwise, the lampstand will be removed from us individually and from the church corporately.
4. If today we take Christ as the first in everything, we will have love, we will enjoy Him as life, we will shine forth with Him as light, and we will become the shining lampstand as the testimony of Jesus; this eventually will become our reward not only in this age but even more in the coming age; in the thousand-year kingdom we will enjoy Christ as our reward in the Paradise of God.

### **Excerpts from the Ministry:**

#### **TO OVERCOME THE LEAVING OF THE FIRST LOVE**

The Lord charges us to overcome all kinds of religion, and in these seven epistles He also charges us to overcome some other matters. The first thing we are charged to overcome is the leaving, the missing, the losing, of the first love (Rev. 2:4-5a). Many in Catholicism are absolutely for the Catholic Church, but they do not love the Lord or His holy Word. They do not say, "The Bible says..." Instead, they say, "The pope says..." or "The church says..." When they say "the church," they mean the Catholic Church. This is why the Lord Jesus in Revelation 2 says that Jezebel calls herself a prophetess and teaches and leads His slaves astray (v. 20). This indicates that the Roman Catholic Church is a self-appointed prophetess, one who presumes to be authorized by God to speak for God. Those who are loyal Catholics respect only what the pope says, what the church says. They do not care for what the Bible says. This indicates that they do not have any love given to the Lord.

If we love someone, we surely want to hear his voice, his word. On the other hand, if we do not love a person, we do not want to hear his voice, his word. A number of Catholics are like this toward the Lord. They have Christ in name, but they do not have any personal affection or loving element within them toward Christ. It is also like this with the tares in Protestantism, who are not saved. They have no element of love toward the Lord personally.

I must testify that I love the Lord. I received the Lord sixty-seven years ago in 1925. After all of these years, I feel that the Lord is still so intimate to me and that I am so close to Him. I do not care for any religion. I care for this dear One, this living One. Whenever I mention His name, I am happy. When we wake up in the morning, the first thing we should do is say, "O Lord Jesus. O Lord Jesus." It is better to add, "I love You." We should say, "O Lord Jesus, I love You. O Lord Jesus, I love You." How intimate, how sweet, and how affectionate this is!

Our God, our Christ, our Lord, is not only loving but also very affectionate. He is full of affection. God has "fallen in love" with us, His chosen and redeemed people. If you say, "O Lord Jesus, I love You," right away you will fall in love with Him. Quite often I would not do some things, not merely because they are not right or because I fear God but because I love Him. I would say, "Lord Jesus, I love You, so I cannot do this." I just cannot do certain things, because I love Him.

We need to overcome the loss of the first love. The church in Ephesus was a good church. It was an orderly church and a formal church (vv. 2-3). Surely we would like such a church, but such an orderly church had left the first love (v. 4). The Greek word for *first* is the same as that translated "best" in Luke 15:22. Our first love toward the Lord must be the best love for Him. When the prodigal son in Luke 15 came back home, the father told the servants to bring the *best* robe. The *best* here is the first.

Now I would like us to consider what the first love is. Many Christians think that the first love is the love with which we loved the Lord Jesus when we were saved. I would not say that this is wrong, but it is not adequate. The first love which is the best love is much more than this.

The first love is the love which is God Himself. In the Bible we are told that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). In the whole universe, only God is love. The Lord charges the husbands to love their wives. But it is impossible for the husbands to love their wives in themselves because we are not love. There is only one person who is love—God.

God is not only the best but also the first. In the whole universe, God is first. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God...” This is the opening of the Bible. God is the beginning. God is the first. Colossians tells us that our Christ must have the first place. He must have the preeminence (1:18b). Christ must be the first. What is it to recover the first love? To recover the first love is to consider the Lord Jesus as the first in everything. If we make Christ everything in our life, that means we have overcome the loss of the first love.

We need to consider our situation. Is Christ the first in everything with us? The first item we have to overcome is the loss of Christ as the first, as the best, as the real love. The failure of Israel was that they forsook God, the fountain of living waters, and the degradation of the church is the leaving of the first love. Actually, to leave the first love is just to leave Christ, not taking Him as the first in everything.

Christ should be first not only in big things but also in small things. When the brothers buy a necktie, they should give Christ the first place. If I wore a certain kind of tie in a very worldly style, I would not be able to speak for the Lord in my ministry. Even for the sake of my conscience, I cannot wear certain styles of ties. The sisters should give Christ the first place in the way that they style their hair. If the sisters give Christ the preeminence in the way that they style their hair, this means that they are taking Him as their first love. Sisters who have a worldly hair style do not have Christ as their first love. They are not giving Him the preeminence. We should give Christ the preeminence in the way that we dress and the way that we style our hair. When we give Christ the preeminence in everything, this is to recover the loss of the first love.

Some think that the first love was our love for the Lord at the beginning of our Christian life when we were saved. But when I was saved, although I was very grateful to the Lord, I did not have such a strong heart to love Christ as I do today. Sixty-seven years ago I was saved and I loved the Lord Jesus, but not as much as I do today. Thus, the first love must be to have God, Christ, the Lord, our Master, as the first One in everything.

At times when I am getting dressed, I talk to the Lord by saying, “Lord, do You like this shirt? Do You like this pair of shoes?” Such a talk is very intimate with the Lord as the first love. To recover the first love is to give Him the preeminence in great things as well as in small things. The husbands should give Christ the preeminence in the way that they talk to their wives. We need to ask the Lord to forgive us for all the things in which we do not give Him the preeminence.

If we love the Lord Jesus in such a way and to such an extent, we will never stay in the three “isms.” We will never remain in any religion. We will love all the Christians, but we will hate any “anity.” We should love all the Christians, but we should hate the religions in which they are. Because the Lord hates these “isms,” we also should hate them. We should hate what the Lord hates (cf. Rev. 2:6).

The Lord said to let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest. Then when He comes back, the first thing He will do is to send angels to bind up the tares in bundles and throw them into the lake of fire. The sons of the kingdom, the wheat, constitute the

kingdom, whereas the sons of the evil one, the tares, have formed the outward appearance of the kingdom, which is today's Christendom. The Lord hates this outward appearance, so we must overcome it.

We also need to overcome in the kind of ties we wear, in the way that we style our hair, and in all of the small things. In all things we should give the preeminence to Christ. If we do this, our Christian life will be different, and our feeling will be different. Throughout the day, we will be happy in the Lord. When we are joyful in and with the Lord, everything is pleasant. On the other hand, when we are not joyful in the Lord and with the Lord, everything is unpleasant. The enjoyment of the Lord as grace is with those who love Him (Eph. 6:24). Thus, the first thing we have to overcome is the leaving of the first love. The leaving of the first love is the source of and main reason for the failure of the church throughout the ages.

#### **TO MAINTAIN THE EATING OF CHRIST AS THE TREE OF LIFE**

In such a good, orderly, and formal church like the church in Ephesus, we need to first overcome the loss of the first love. The second thing we need is to maintain the eating of Christ as the tree of life. It is in the epistle to the Ephesians that the Lord says, "To him who overcomes, to him I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7).

The Lord Jesus charged us to overcome the leaving of the first love and to maintain the eating of Christ as the tree of life. If we give the preeminence to Christ in everything and enjoy Him as the tree of life every day, we will be marvelous, overcoming Christians. When we enjoy Christ as the tree of life, we have the Paradise of God. The tree of life is first seen in Genesis in the garden of Eden. That garden of Eden was the paradise of God at that time. Today our paradise is the church life.

I have been in the church life for sixty years, starting from 1932, so I have much church life experience. If you do not give the preeminence to the Lord or enjoy the Lord, even for a month, the church life may become an unpleasant place to you. Of course, you might not say this, but deep within you would think that there is not much good in the church life. Then the church is altogether no longer a paradise to you. But when you overcome the loss of the first love and maintain your eating of Christ, your enjoying of the Lord, right away the church life becomes paradise to you. Thus, our sensation and our attitude toward the church depend upon our situation. If we give the Lord the preeminence in everything and enjoy Him as the tree of life throughout the day, right away the church, regardless of its condition, becomes paradise to us. This is why the Lord says that we have to eat the tree of life in the Paradise of God.

Of course, the Paradise of God in Revelation 2:7 actually refers to the New Jerusalem in the thousand-year kingdom. If we enjoy the Lord in this age, we will be rewarded with the eating of the tree of life, Christ Himself, in the New Jerusalem as the Paradise of God in the thousand-year kingdom. We need to continue in the enjoyment of the life supply of Christ in the present church life so that we can be rewarded with the enjoyment of Christ as the tree of life in the Paradise of God, the New Jerusalem, in the millennial kingdom. In the New Jerusalem in its freshness as the Paradise of God, we will participate in full in the enjoyment of the rich life supply of Christ as the embodiment of the processed and consummated Triune God.

#### **TO SHINE FORTH THE DIVINE LIGHT AS THE LAMPSTAND**

We need to overcome the leaving of the first love, to maintain the eating of Christ as the

tree of life, and to shine forth the divine light as the lampstand (v. 5b). Love is related to life, and life is related to light. Love, life, and light are a trinity. If you make Christ the first in everything, you have love. If you have this love, you have life, and you will enjoy the Lord. If you have life, this life becomes light to you. The light of the lampstand, the church, shines forth corporately versus individualistically in the dark night of the church age.

**TO KEEP THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS  
AS THE SHINING OF THE LAMPSTAND IN THEIR LOCALITY**

If we are enjoying Christ as our love, life, and light, we will keep the testimony of Jesus as the shining of the lampstand in our locality (12:17b). We will testify of Christ's person as God and as man and of Christ's human living, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, descension, and second appearing. The shining of the light is a testimony. In every aspect of our daily life, we should be shining forth Christ. This shining is the shining of the lampstand.

We need to remember these four words that begin with the letter *l*—*love, life, light, and lampstand*. These four *l* words start with *love*. We must give the Lord Jesus the preeminence in every way and in everything to recover the first love. Then we will enjoy Him as the tree of life, and this life right away becomes the light of life (John 8:12). Then we will be shining in our daily life and corporately as the lampstand. Otherwise, the lampstand will be removed from us individually and from the church corporately. The Lord warned the church in Ephesus to repent and recover the first love for the enjoyment of Him. Otherwise, the lampstand would be removed from them. We need love, life, light, and the lampstand. Then we will be rewarded by the Lord with what we are and live in Him.

In the Bible, the principle is that our reward is always what we are. What we are will become our reward. If we love others, our loving others will be a reward to us. If we honor our parents, our honor to them will be a reward to us. If we do not live Christ and behave in Christ in the church life, there will be nothing as a reward to us in the church life. Instead, because we do not live Christ, we may feel bitter toward the elders and toward all the saints. If we live Christ and behave in Christ, this living, this behaving, will become our reward. Then we will be happy in the church life. If today we take Christ as the first in everything, we will have love, we will enjoy Him as life, we will shine forth with Him as light, and we will become the shining lampstand as the testimony of Jesus. This eventually will become our reward not only in this age but even more in the coming age. In the thousand-year kingdom we will enjoy Christ as our reward in the Paradise of God. (*The Overcomers*, pp. 30-36)