

Hebrews, Love, And The Ephesian Church

Returning to the First Love

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Given 02-Oct-04; Sermon #FT04-05

Has there ever been a time in mankind's history when there are so many potential distractions as are available today? These are things about which we must make choices—however small or great, whether just momentarily passing or time-consuming judgments about. For example, are you aware that there are 500 television channels that are accessible in the United States of America? In former ages, there was no TV. No radio, telephone, computer, Internet, automobiles or even electricity.

Have we ever thought about how stressful these luxuries are? Formerly, people were pretty much confined on farms or cities that were much smaller. The number of merchants that one could either buy from or sell to was much, much fewer in number. One either walked, rode on an animal or a cart that was pulled by an animal. Even the choices of foods one would eat were few in number.

Today, there may be several different means by which you can go to work in the morning. Or, if your only means is an automobile, there still might be several different routes that you can choose between to get you there.

This particular point could be explored a great deal further, but my point is that this tremendous variety of choices is very stressful in themselves. Also, many of them have the potential to be time-consuming, attention-grabbing distractions from far more important matters.

There is a direct connection between my first two sermons and this one. I think that we all believe that Matthew 24 applies to a greater degree right now than at any time in the history of the church. Jesus painted a picture of stressfully intense worldwide activity. I want to stress **worldwide** activity that we must endure, because it is going on; and it, indeed, is impacting us. The worse has not yet begun, but it is already very stressful, whether we understand or not.

I am going to give you a simple cause of the greatest portion of it. It is *sin*. I mean the cause of the stress. It is sin—just out and out sin. And the danger of all of this to us is that it has the potential of doing something that could be catastrophic.

Matthew 24:12 Because iniquity [sin, lawlessness] shall abound, the love of many will grow cold.

The potential effect of sin is the diminishing and loss of love—even though one is not living "a life of sin." That is the dangerous part. He is saying that people will give up the fight to keep one's head above the psychological murk created by ever-increasing lawlessness.

God inspired a book in His Word that addresses this kind of circumstance that we find ourselves in. It is, in its own way, the hardest hitting book in the New Testament and perhaps even in the entire Bible. On the other hand, it is also arguably the most encouraging as well, because of the very reassuring subject material. That book is the book of Hebrews.

In the past, I have applied this book to Laodiceanism; but I read something about another era of the church and began to see that Hebrews actually applies more to it than it does to Laodicea. I feel that even **we** fail to fully appreciate the Bible's continuous relevance. It deals in absolutes, and yet it is always up to date. The whole Bible is written for us. But if there was ever a book that was written with a message of exhortation and guidance for this church era, at this stage of existence, it is Hebrews.

In fact, Hebrews is not even truly an epistle. It is more like a treatise. But it is not exactly a treatise either. A treatise is a persuasive argument in writing; but a treatise does not contain exhortation, as Hebrews does. In fact, Hebrews arguably contains the most powerful exhortations in the Bible—giving rise to the truth that it was written to a people in very difficult spiritual trials.

Among church members, I dare say that it is the least known and least understood of all the New Testament epistles. We know of the Faith Chapter, chapter 11; Melchizedek, chapter 7; the Priestly Image, beginning in chapter 5. But often we miss the whole of the author's thought.

Scholars also, when they research into it, perceive many uncertainties; but they are sure of its theme, why it was written, and its major importance to us. It was written to a group of Christian—almost certainly Jews—in a situation similar to ours, but one that was in a more advanced stage of development. They too, when this epistle was written, were approaching the end of an age.

Their "age" began with Christ's birth and continued through His preaching, His death, His resurrection, the founding of the church, the preaching of the gospel by the apostles (first to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles as well); and it moved towards the 70 A.D.

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dissolution of Jewish life in Palestine.

Our "age" began with the calling and conversion of Herbert Armstrong in 1927 to the beginning of the Philadelphian Era in 1933, the founding of Ambassador College, to the preaching of the gospel around the world, Herbert Armstrong's death and the scattering of the church, towards the dissolution of man's rule over the entire earth.

Hebrews was written to an older, established group—"crusty old soldiers," as Richard called them—some of whom may have been in the church 20 or 30 years at the time that this was written. Some were probably second-generation Christians. They just grew up in the church, and it was just 'church' to them. They did not have the same level, measure, and intensity of enthusiasm that their parents did. Some of those parents may have even been eyewitnesses to Christ's ministry, to His work, to His resurrection.

The problem confronted by Hebrews had to do with the times that they lived in AND the conflicting attitudes of the people towards the times and the good news they heard through the church. They were being pressured by the times. Theirs was not a bloody persecution, but there was a great deal of subtle psychological pressure. The nature of the pressure was economic, social, moral, and spiritual.

They were being distracted from God's calling, and were constantly being pressured to go back to the world of Judaism and/or paganism. Others were distracted perhaps by even the very success of what the apostles produced under God. Maybe they were even being harassed somewhat, or affected negatively by their own prosperity.

The people to whom Hebrews was written were somewhat 'punch drunk' with the repeated hardships and the daily grind of contact with society's moral, economic, and social problems; all the general, all-around wrangling, division, and offense within the church; as well as the stresses of overcoming.

Matthew 24:12 tells us, in Jesus' own words, that the iniquity is in the world. But resisting it is a constant stress because it exerts a tremendous pressure through an appealing façade to give into it and go long with it. Gradually, as one lives with it, and everybody is doing it, it becomes acceptable behavior—thus giving evidence that indifference towards evil is taking over. That indifference is what must be guarded against! In one simple sentence: Sin becomes tolerable.

Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament says of this verse that it has the sense of "*spiritual energy blighted or chilled by a maligned and poisonous wind.*" That is an arresting word picture. A surfeit of lawlessness breathes negativity, suspicion, distrust,

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wariness, and self-centeredness as one seeks security against being taken advantage of.

On the one hand, love is an outgoing force, persuasion, or conduct. But this negative force turns us in on ourselves because we are being impacted by the malignant spiritual energy sapping our spiritual strength. Thus, our motivation is to be overly self-concerned. And that self-concern is what chills God's love in us, because it nullifies the out-going force of what true love is.

Sin, in the form of law breaking, was not a major issue with those being written to in Hebrews. However, the people to whom it was written were nonetheless sinning. One of the definitions of sin is falling short of the glory of God. That definition does not directly involve law breaking. Sin is falling short of the mark, missing the mark. Sometimes 'the mark' is the law. So, if we do not keep that law, we have fallen short of it.

But what if it is sin in a different form? How about sins of attitude? Is that the way God is? Is He in bad attitudes all the time? Is His attitude negative? Does His attitude stifle love? You see, we are falling short of what He Himself is. So their sin was far more subtle than someone who was out there repeatedly breaking a law. But these people were not living up to that standard.

Let us fit one of the messages to the churches of Revelation 2 and 3 into what this scripture [Matthew 24:12] is telling us. There are a number of ways in which the messages to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 can be understood. They can be understood as relating to spiritual conditions in seven 1st century congregations. Or they can also fit seven groups at the end time church as well. Or it could be a combination, when one of those is combined with the usage of these messages as eras. That last one is instructive to us, and it is especially instructive to Ephesus. So let us look at the message to Ephesus once again.

Revelation 2:1-6 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write: These things said He that holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; "I know your works, and your labor, and your patience, and how you can not bear them which are evil: and you have tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars. And have borne, and have patience [or, perseverance], and for My name's sake have labored, and have not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against you, because you have left your first love. Remember therefore from when you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of its

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place, except you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

The Ephesian era, containing the ones to whom Hebrews was originally written, had left its first love and was gradually becoming listless regarding spiritual things. They were drifting, becoming hard, becoming without feeling towards Christ (at least, partly) because of the previously mentioned distracting stresses.

The book of Hebrews amplifies and provides reasons for, and advises on, how to recapture that diminishing love. The most serious aspect of this was that their faith was diminishing right along too, because they were falling short of the intensity of attention God felt they should be giving Him—seeing that they were supposed to be preparing to marry Him!

Their sins were problems of the heart. Their falling short of pleasing Christ was in their attitudes regarding their relationship with God and life, and the work of God. The author of Hebrews strove mightily to give them hope and to show them their responsibilities in these distracting times.

At issue here is not only the times that they lived in, but also how they reacted to the times AND their calling. The calling is never out of the picture. They were, after all, in the Hebrew culture **already** considered married to Christ—even as Mary was already considered married to Joseph though the formal ceremony had not yet taken place.

Christ is chastening them for their lack of fervency for Him **as a Person!** They had left their first love. Why? What happened to the first grateful, joyful, blush of enthusiasm they had at the beginning of their relationship with Him? Was Jesus Christ concerned that He was witnessing for the second time the loss of the heart of one to whom He was married?

Let us go back to the book of Ezekiel. As we read through a portion of Ezekiel 16, I want you to notice the progression of the relationship that is being described here.

Ezekiel 16:6-15 "And when I passed by you, and saw you polluted in your own blood, I said unto you when you were in your blood, 'Live;' Yes, I said unto you when you were in your blood, 'Live.' I have caused you to multiply as the bud of the field, and you have increased and waxed [grown] great, and you are come to excellent ornaments: your breasts are fashioned, and your hair is grown, whereas you were naked and bare. Now when I passed

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by you, and looked upon you, behold, your time was the time of love; and I spread My skirt over you, and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore unto you, and entered into a covenant with you," said the Lord Good, "and you became Mine [My wife]. Then washed I you with water; yes, I thoroughly washed away your blood from you, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered work, and shod you with badgers' skin, and I girded you about with fine linen, and I covered you with silk. I decked you also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon your hands, and a chain on your neck. And I put a jewel on your forehead, and earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown upon your head. Thus were you decked with gold and silver; and your raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and embroidered work; you did eat fine flour, and honey, and oil: and you were exceeding beautiful, and you did prosper into a kingdom. And your renown went forth among the heathen for your beauty: for it was perfect through My comeliness [splendor], which I had put upon you," said the Lord Good. "But you did trust in your own beauty, and played the harlot because of your renown, and poured out your fornications on every one that passed by; his it was."

Ezekiel is clearly picturing it as a marriage covenant. But look at what Israel did with the beauty that He [God] had brought into her life. Please notice the parallel between this and the letter to the Ephesians. God describes how their relationship was drastically altered as she became distracted—giving her attentions to others she found attractive. She had wandering eyes, and her heart slipped away from the One who had brought such beauty and prosperity into her life.

In the second chapter of Jeremiah we find a little indication of how it was from the other way—that is, from Israel towards God at the beginning of the relationship.

Jeremiah 2:2 "Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus said the LOORD; "I remember you, the kindness of your youth, the love of your espousals, when you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.'"

He shows that, very early in the relationship, she was hot after Him (as we might say). What a change though by Ezekiel 16:15! So here we have witness of the fervency of Israel's devotion at the beginning of their relationship. But the relationship waned as a result of Israel's lustful heart opening the doorway to other exciting-to-her activities that distracted her from her obligations to the One to whom she was married.

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Jeremiah 3:8 And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce.

The relationship was destroyed beyond repair at that time. But was this same thing happening under the New Covenant to the Ephesian Era? Paul gives us a little bit of a hint that indeed it was happening.

II Corinthians 11:1-3 Would to God you could bear with me a little in my folly: and indeed bear with me. For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband [Christ], that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

Now, you know very well that he wrote that because he could see what was happening in the Corinthian church. But do you think the Corinthian church was the only one that was doing this during the Ephesian Era? I do not think so. The same tendency that was in Israel was also in them (the Corinthians). And let us be honest, brethren—the same tendency can be in us too.

That is why Christ complains, there in Revelation 2:5. The first blush of ecstasy had passed. The early devotion had cooled. They had been fervently in love with Him, but the love was rapidly cooling. They were distracted from Him. And so Christ first seeks to correct the disintegrating relationship by informing her of where her problem lies.

Every once in a while, we ministers get our eyes opened—our minds shaken; and we are reminded by God of Who is running the show. Please turn to Hosea 2. I did not help Bill prepare his sermonette, and he did not help me on mine; but Somebody up there told him *"I want you to expound this verse. John Ritenbaugh is going to use it too."*

Although Bill used it in relation to the church, to which it certainly applies, it was originally written, remember, to the nation of Israel. Please understand that this is a prophecy that has not yet occurred. As Bill applied it to the church, it also applies to Israel. It actually applies to those to whom he was speaking to through Hosea. And we are looking forward to this time that is portrayed these verses.

Hosea was inspired by God to marry a prostitute; and that gal put poor Hosea through the ringer. So Hosea was given a lesson in his own marriage of what God went through

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spiritually with Israel—and what Christ is concerned about in Revelation 2, because He could see that era was drifting towards the same thing.

Hosea 2:14-16 "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope. And she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be at that day," said the LOORD, "that you shall call Me Ishi [meaning, husband]; and shall call Me no more Baali [that is, lord]."

Hosea 2:19-23 "And I will betroth you unto Me forever; yes, I will betroth you unto Me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth you unto Me in faithfulness: and you shall know the LOORD. And it shall come to pass in that day, I will hear," said the LOORD, "I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth. And the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel. And I will sow her unto Me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not My people, 'You are My people;' and they shall say, 'You are my God.'"

What we need to draw from this (and apply it to Revelation 2, and apply it to our time) is that, brethren, we are not going to be married to a cipher, to a zero, to a nothing. He is a powerful Leader; but He is also a warm and tender Being—a Person with tender feelings, who sorrows for us when His love towards us goes unrequited. He wants our continuing, deepening, adoration—because it is good for us, even as human marriage is best when both are giving of themselves in love to the other.

Brethren, God is love; and love is the first and foremost important mark of the true and living church. Christian life is essentially a loving relationship with Jesus Christ, whom we love because He first loved us. We are to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind. But why is this so important to Christian life?

Several weeks before the Feast, as I was preparing these sermons, I saw the movie "Star Trek: The Final Frontier;" and it helped me to prepare this sermon. The movie does not directly address the issue of this sermon; but it helped me to see what Christ's concern is about, and what it will take to overcome the breakdown.

Do you know what "the final frontier" was in that movie? It was the search for the

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dwelling place of God. As they depicted it in the movie, no one had ever gone there. The plot involved a reasonably good man on a planet remote from Earth. He sincerely believes that he has received a message from God, and has been given a gift of healing people's psychological pains to help him find God's dwelling place. So the man concocts a plan that includes plotting a rebellion that he believes will motivate the Space Federation government to respond by sending a spaceship to investigate and, if possible, quell the rebellion.

Now, the plan he came up with would not involve killing anybody. But, unfortunately, James T. Kirk and his crew intervened in a wrong way; and some people got killed. But it was really the spaceship that the man wanted, because he needed it to go to where he was told that God lives.

So the spaceship Enterprise, and the crew of James T. Kirk, and Spock arrive on the scene. The rebel's plan succeeds; and thus Kirk and his crew are captured, and the spaceship commandeered. (Incidentally, the word "church" comes from the word "kirk.")

Then, on the way to where God supposedly lives, the rebel manages to convert everybody—except Kirk and Spock—to his way of thinking, because he is really a nice guy. Spock is mildly skeptical; but he holds his peace, seeking clearer answers. Kirk is more openly unbelieving and strongly resistant.

The man converts people to his way by means of his gift, which forces people to confront their pains—including the guilt that they feel about certain events in their lives. And it is during this part of the film that we are told that the rebel is Spock's half brother. The man attempted to make Spock understand that Spock had a great deal of pain in him because he is half human, half Vulcan, and because (and this is the real reason) Spock's father rejected him to some degree immediately after Spock was born, because he considered Spock imperfect. Spock is noncommittal, as I said, and thoughtful about this—realizing that there might be a measure of truth to what this man (his half brother) has told him.

On the other hand, Bones—the doctor—feels very guilty and fearful about being responsible for his father's death. He, a doctor, had pulled the plug on his father when he had an incurable disease; and not long after, a cure was found. If Bones had been just a little more patient, his father might still be alive. And so the man makes a convert of Bones.

The rebel then turns his attention to Kirk; but Kirk rebuffs it—because, as he said, he feared nothing. That included **pain**. And it was right here that I recalled that the apostle

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John said, "Perfect love casts out all fear." [1 John 4:18] And then Kirk added something else. He said that he did not fear pain, because ***pain makes us what we are***. He was saying that he perceived pain to be **a pathway to growth**, and therefore it was good.

Now, my mind exploded in thought; and for a good while I lost track of the movie. I asked myself, "Is that true?" The answer is a qualified "yes," IF another factor exists in our thinking. And I think that this other factor, combined with pain, is why Christ is so concerned about the loss, or the diminishing, of the Ephesians' love.

Revelation 2:7 He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said unto the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

It is those who overcome who receive the rewards. The word "overcomes" is more synonymous with the English word *conquers*. Overcoming is not easy! It involves intense struggle against what might be superior forces. In almost every case, the battles are not won without frequent, intense, painful sacrificing. In overcoming, suffering (pain) is always present! If it is not, then what are you overcoming? Nothing. The reason the pain has to be there is that without it there would be no victory, because nothing was conquered. It is the conquerors that get the rewards.

And, of course, it gives you somewhat a picture of warfare going on. We wrestle against wicked spirits in high places. We wrestle against our nature, and that nature is strong. Those demons are strong, and they are not going to give up easily. They are going to make us jump through the hoops to beat them. And the chances are very great that they are going to do that through **attitudes**. I mean the resistance against doing right and good is going to come through attitudes.

Hebrews 5 is about Melchizedek—Christ.

Hebrews 5:7 Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death...

Does not "strong crying" and "tears" give you the idea that He was doing something that was hard? Painful?

Hebrews 5:7-9 ...and was heard in that He feared; through He were a Son,

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yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered; and being made perfect [fit, suitable], He became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him.

Christ was prepared for His responsibility as High Priest through the things that He suffered. Suffering indicates difficulty, pain, and something struggled against and defeated. Right here, brethren, is the pattern we must likewise follow regarding the trials, circumstances, and situations that we must face during life. Everybody—converted or unconverted—faces difficult circumstances during life.

So what is the factor that makes facing pain have the possibility of making us what we are, or should I say, should be? James T. Kirk said, "are;" and he was on the right track. Pain (suffering) is of maximum benefit ONLY if it occurs within a narrow spectrum of understanding—or, should I say, the spectrum of faith in God. Otherwise, suffering—pain—is fully capable of producing bitterness, anger, jealousy, contempt, lust, hatred, or even an "I do not care" lethargy for that matter.

What matters is the attitude and understanding in which it is faced. Suffering pain only produces good qualities IF it is faced for the right reasons. For a Christian, the right reasons are contained within the gospel of the Kingdom of God—most specifically of all, IF they are faced *out of love for the Person of Jesus Christ*. There is His concern. It is for our own well being that we love Him—because it will drive us to overcome, to please Him.

It is not mere knowledge of these things that is important to Jesus Christ. **It is knowledge linked to experience with Him that grows to a deep love for Him and drives us to make any sacrifice necessary to please Him within the relationship. It is that combination that makes us what we are.** The Ephesian church is proof that it is possible to be obedient, to go about one's responsibilities, and still not please Him—because, although dutiful, we are emotionally dissatisfied in the relationship because we do not really love HIM.

Do you understand that this is the quality that set David apart from others? It is why he was called "a man after God's own heart." David's love for God is expressed so well and often in the Psalms. He did not just obey God. He loved Him! "Thee will I love."

Do we understand that love—combined with faith and fear (the fear of God)—is what drives us to glorify and please God? By this combination, we are created fit for whatever it is that we are being prepared for in His Kingdom, just as Jesus was. What the author

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of that movie had Kirk say in these words was correct, as long as the love factor is also present.

Now let us go back to the beginning of Revelation 2, and see how Christ sets the stage for His correction—because His description is given to help them refocus their lives to what they had earlier in their conversion, and why they should repent and give their full attention to Him.

Revelation 2:1-3 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write: These things said He that holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; "I know your works, and your labor, and your patience, and how you can not bear them which are evil: and you have tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars: And have borne, and have patience, and for My name's sake have labored, and have not fainted."

He holds the seven stars in one hand, and it even specifies His right hand. The right hand, in this usage, symbolically indicates prominence, power, authority, control, blessing, or it can even indicate person. He walks in the midst of the seven candlesticks; and, in this sense, the walking indicates that He is actively overseeing the conduct, activities, successes, failures of the seven churches. He is in no way passive about His responsibilities of caring for the church, and He desires some of His passion to flow back to Him from those that He is serving.

Revelation 1:20 The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which you saw are the seven churches.

That clarifies what that is. At any rate, the picture here is of Him being in absolute control. The word "walk" adds to the portrayal that His is an unwearied labor in behalf of His churches. And that is more impressive when the seven churches are considered as seven eras, and not just a one-time thing; but stretches out throughout the history of the church.

We are going to come back here, but I want us to see just a little bit about how important it is that Christ is active in the church all through its history. And I want you to think about how important this is to you personally, as an individual.

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John 10:28 "And I give unto them [His sheep] eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man [anyone] pluck them out of My hand."

That is why we need Him walking amongst the churches—why we need Him personally; because, were He not on the job overseeing the church, the demons would make mincemeat out of us in no time.

John 5:17 Jesus answered them, "My Father works hitherto, and I work."

That is not well translated there, but the "hitherto" kind of works okay for the Father because it indicates work that started in the past, and has continued without interruption all the way up to the time that Jesus is talking. In other words, He has been working from the very beginning. And then Christ adds Himself—"Me too." His work never ends. He is continuously working, and that is important to you and me.

John 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in Me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

Boy, do we need Him!

The Ephesian church exhibited three positive qualities, for which He commends them. It indicates that they were a busy, active church. They could not stand the evil lawbreakers, who were rabble-rousers that we have been hearing about in my recent series. And so they went after these Gnostic-types, put them to the test and then out of the fellowship. Besides that, there was a great deal of patient endurance—so much so that He mentions it twice.

That last quality is particularly interesting because the book of Acts mentions persecutions that evolved into riots on a couple of different occasions because of Paul's preaching, and people's conversions cut deeply in one case into the sales of the figurines (or the little idols) of the gods of that city. Actually, I think it was Ephesus too in that one particular case.

But there might be a great deal more here than a casual glance might reveal. If the city of Ephesus people were stirred up enough to riot, they very well may have declared anyone who was a Christian as 'persona non grata' in terms of a job. Then they could not find any work. And though they were not being made bloody, they were slowly

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starving to death. That is an interesting persecution to consider. And, in that case, the persecution would have been economically severe.

I think from an overall point of view of what it says here in Revelation 2, this was really not an immoral group. In fact, I would have to say they were an obedient group. So what went wrong? Very simply put, the answer lies in what happens to married couples when the spark, the passion, is allowed to go out of the relationship.

Did you notice that I said, "allowed" to go out? All marriage relationships change as we age and the marriage becomes older. But when love grows cold, the couple goes about their relationship mechanically. They may not divorce each other, as each goes about dutifully but without wanting to sacrifice—doing just enough to maintain respectability within the community.

The Ephesian members endured their persecutions and sufferings with bravery, but without love. It is one thing to clench one's fist in stoic indifference, and another thing altogether to face adversity in a positive, upbeat, hopefulness about winning. Not merely enduring, but winning! Overcoming. Conquering. Making something beautiful out of a mess. That is, something that has been **allowed** to become a mess.

The Ephesian members were 'right down the line' doctrinally. But they were without any joyful warmth that love would invest in it. To be theologically correct and to hate error is only one part of loving Christ. Remember I said earlier that we are in a relationship with a powerful, wonderful, kind and generous Being who died for us.

Love is greater than knowledge. Do you want to see proof of that? Turn with me to I Corinthians 13. This is the very first thing Paul addresses.

I Corinthians 13:1-2 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity [love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

Are you beginning to see why Christ said, *"If you do not repent, Ephesus, I am going to remove your candlestick."* Even though they were an obedient and persevering church, there was no spark in the relationship. They were not really giving anything to it.

Why would Paul say something like this? It is because *knowledge* is concerned with

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things, principles, concepts. It is one-sided. It is a static affair. And do you know what the result of that is? PRIDE! "*I know more than others do.*" But you see, *love* is concerned with persons—including our living Savior, to whom we are to be married. Love is greater than faith, greater than hope; and it never ends.

Do you think Christ could not see it? The love they did have was going to end. And what would He end up with, if they did not repent? He would end up throwing them into the Lake of Fire.

Revelation 2:5 Remember therefore from whence you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works: or else I will come unto you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of its place, except you repent.

So the first thing He tells them to do to remedy the situation is to remember what it had been like earlier in the relationship. He was not talking to inexperienced people. These people were not novices in the church.

Hebrews 5:12-14 For when for a time you ought to be teachers, you have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. For strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

These people had been in the church a long time—long enough that they should have been teachers who were fine examples to everybody else.

Christ tells them to remember. Memory is a wonderful, precious gift from God. But it can be abused too. To look back as Lot's wife did can be sinful. But to look back can also be sensible. Again, it depends upon the attitude. To look back with lustful eyes on the easygoing comforts of the world, once we have put our hand to the plow and compared it to what we have now, can cost one the Kingdom of God. But to look back as Christ is instructing—to when we were in the blush of first love—we can at least have hope to recapture the vision and repent, if the attitude is to use that to change.

Brethren, we cannot live in the past; but we can recall it, and compare what we are with what we were. Sometimes that can be a disturbing experience. Are you still as aware,

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and are you as concerned as ever, that—wherever you go, whatever you do, and whatever you say—you are bearing His name with you? Are you as fervent in prayer and study? Do you know Him really deeply, inside and out, as maybe you used to understand?

So He tells them to repent. That means to change the direction. As we heard from Clyde yesterday, it is a three-fold operation; but it ends with **doing**. I want you to notice something. He did not tell them to 'feel bad' about their lack of love. They must NOT WAIT until they feel sorry in order to be motivated. He tells them to turn, and begin to do—immediately!

All too often, we are like a little kid who falls in the mud puddle; and then just stays there, crying his eyes out, waiting for somebody to pick him up. *"Do not just stay there. Do something!"* Christ is saying. *"Pick yourself up. Move on. Go back to doing what you did at the first."*

They should know what they did at the first. Their memories should be sharp enough to recall that instantaneously, and know that they had slipped from what they were contributing to the union before the fog settled in.

This is very helpful instruction for any couple that has drifted apart. Recall what you did and what attitudes you had then—the things that brought you together so earnestly and passionately that you married. And then go back and do them again. God is telling you and me that the spark can be re-ignited!

Do you believe God? I am not just talking about the spiritual marriage here. I am talking about our physical unions. If we approach things the way Bill said in his sermonette, the spark will be reunited by going back and doing, and having the attitudes that we had before. Forgiveness will occur. The wrongs will be put behind. And we will pick ourselves up from the mud puddle and go on. In another place, He says *"Forgetting those things which are behind, and pressing forward."* [Philippians 3:13] That is what He wants from these people here in Revelation 2.

What is it that more often than not brings about this sort of distraction?

Luke 21:34-35 Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth.

This chapter is Luke's version of what appears in Matthew 24. So what does he tell us to be aware of being burdened down with? I do not think most of us would be burdened down with carousing and drunkenness. But all of us would be burdened with ***the cares of life***. Nobody escapes this one. This is why I began as I did, laying the foundation for this sermon.

It is the burdens of this world that makes us feel listless and unmotivated. Then, the ultimate effect is that we give ourselves permission to be distracted in this evil day. And, if we continue this, then the really evil day will come upon us like a snare. In other words, so much attention is given to the distraction of 'the cares of this life' that the more important relationship with Christ drifts into the background of our priorities.

The cares of this life are not inherently evil. But they become a major problem IF we allow them to dominate our attention. Instead of conquering them, they conquer us. They can be controlled IF we will exercise discipline.

Luke 10:38-42 Now it came to pass, as they went, that He entered into a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha received Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard His word. But Martha was cumbered about with much serving, and came to Him, and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me." And Jesus answered and said unto her, "Martha, Martha, you are careful [distracted] and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Yesterday Martin mentioned the movie, "The Gospel of John." There was one part of that which really illustrates this. And, incidentally, all the dialogue in that movie is taken from the book of John—all of it. At any rate, this took place when Jesus came to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead. Martha went out to meet Him, and then she returned to where Mary was. She said, "*Mary, the Master asks for you.*" Mary got up and **ran!** She ran to Him. What a response!

This that we are talking about involved taking care of all the psychological stresses that come along with daily living in this hectic, confused world. "The cares of this life" is dealing with driving, shopping, traveling, entertaining, you name it; plus dealing with the seemingly endless public wrangling of politicians; hearing the news of wars, deaths, divorces, illness, hurricanes, incessant advertising on radio and television. Life is difficult and time consuming, with endless rounds of activities. And it is constantly impacting

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upon us.

Information is coming at us at rocket speeds. All too often, we have to deal with making decisions almost on the spur of the moment. And admittedly this is a very difficult thing to handle—to discipline oneself to keep our activities in proper focus and priority. But those of us who have been in the church for a number of years know that, as far back as the early '80s, Herbert Armstrong was already admonishing us to **simplify** our lives.

Somehow, brethren, it is up to us. Hard decisions must be made to keep ourselves from falling into what the Ephesian church did. It had a dutiful life, but one that was pretty much devoid of peace, and joy, and brilliant vision, and hope-filled expectation one has when someone they love with all of their heart is soon to arrive.

I feel that one of the major, major impediments to us having a good relationship with Christ is the very same thing that causes so many marriages to go sour. In human marriage, both partners are distracted and not really taking care of the marriage. However, in our relationship with Christ, He is not distracted; but we easily become so.

This is what the book of Hebrews deals with. And it provides us with helpful insight to solving this easily-fallen-into trap. It is written to help us **refocus** on what is really important in life. It is a book that should be read often, because it gives us a wonderful summary of the greatness of the Person who is our Christ, our Savior; as well as continually grounding us in the greatness of our calling.

The key word that describes the theme of this book is **better**—superior, greater. We will not go very far, but I want you to notice how the book opens.

Hebrews 1:1-3 God, who at sundry times and in divers [different] manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

What a tremendous opening! It is like a twenty-one gun salute, except all twenty-one guns are going off at one time. This is the One that we are going to marry! He is not only God, He is our Creator. He is everything that any woman in her right mind would do anything to be married to. He is beautiful, handsome, powerful, intelligent, wise, kind,

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generous, good, forgiving, hope-filled.

There is just no end of positive attributes that He has within His character. And He expresses them. He does not hold them inside. That is the way the book begins. The focus in the whole book is: This is how great this One is. There is nobody greater but the Father. And the Father wants YOU to be married to His Son.

What a deal! Are we going to let it just blow by, because we cannot discipline ourselves to give Him the time that Someone so great should not have to appeal for? This begins to get ridiculous, because we know what the answer is. And we know what we give our time and attention to. Those things, in many cases, have to be taken care of. But which one has the priority? Which one is cut out when push comes to shove?

Well, if any of us fall into that area of the Ephesians, we need to repent. And I would suggest that you study the book of Hebrews, because it is loaded with advice for us right now. We are approaching the end of the age, just like these people to whom it was written. These people were falling away. *Therefore we need to give the more earnest heed to the things that we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.* They were.

In chapter 3, He says, "Today, if you will hear My voice." He wants us to respond immediately. And on and on it goes. So, brethren, let us take any hint—even if James T. Kirk helps you to remember. The suffering that you are going through has a good end to it and, if you love Christ, it will make you what you will become.