

Rekindling the Coals of Love

Special Delivery – Part IV

Revelation 2:1-8

Introduction

You are probably aware that an advertising agency in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, launched a billboard campaign that included seventeen messages from God. An anonymous client paid for this massive campaign to deliver messages from God to motorists on America's highways.

Perhaps you have seen one of these messages. The entire billboard is black and the messages are in white letters with the name underneath, "God".

The first one I remember seeing said, "Let's Meet At My House Sunday Before The Game – God."

Another one said, "Have You Read My #1 Best Seller? There Will Be A Test. – God."

I also saw one that read, "What part of 'Thou Shalt Not . . .' Didn't You Understand? – God."

Another one had the message, "Loved The Wedding, Invite Me To The Marriage – God."

This makes me wonder – if I were God and I wanted to deliver a unique message in this century to Christians living in Kentucky, or California, or Cary, North Carolina, what one sentence would I write on a billboard? Surely the Chief Shepherd of the church wants to communicate to His bride – especially those hurtling down I-440.

Darius, the Persian emperor, was so concerned that news had a means to travel quickly around his kingdom that he built a network of roads – paved and leveled – that crisscrossed between the major cities. These roads were called "highways" because they were literally higher than the ground around them.

This was due to the elevation of the road caused by blocks of stone.

The Romans would later perfect the road system with their own network. It was so extensive that the saying, "all roads lead to Rome," was literally true.

In Darius's day, and in Rome's, the common people were not allowed on the highway unless they could pay a toll. If they could not pay, they used the low way instead. The low way, called the byway or the hedges, was simply a cart path that ran alongside the highway. Being uneven and difficult to manage, the common people would often have to veer off this path because of rocks and trees. I have read that it could take someone driving a cart on the low way three months to cover the same distance a horse and rider could cover on the highway in one day.

By the way, when Jesus Christ told His followers to invite everyone from the highways and byways to the Kingdom feast, in Luke 14:23, He was actually saying to invite both rich and poor. The well-connected and the poverty-stricken are equally invited to the table of Christ.

The Persians also designed a postal system that was complex, yet effective. The Persian courier could cover 250 miles a day with postal stations every 15 miles where he could get a fresh horse and continue to gallop toward his final address.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, was so impressed by the Persian mail system that he coined the well-known phrase that is engraved on the General Post Office in New York City. It says: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

By the first century, the postal system of Rome was so developed that a courier could cover nearly 500 miles in 24 hours.

In the days of John the apostle, there were seven postal districts in the province of Asia. In each district there was a church that was about to receive a unique and surprising letter from God.¹

God was not going to write it on billboards. It would be delivered by divine transmission to the apostle John, who was exiled on an island, and then sent by messenger throughout the postal districts of Asia Minor.

The order in which these letters are written follows the circular path of the seven postal districts in first century Rome. All of these letters could arrive at these seven churches on the same day.

Observations about the Seven Letters

Before we open the first letter and read it for ourselves, let me make some observations about these seven letters.

1. First, these are open letters.

In other words, although these letters were specifically written to particular churches, every church could benefit from them. Every church would, in fact, study them and could apply their truths.

This is still true today. Our church will discover herself in Ephesus and Pergamum and Smyrna and Laodicea. We can be encouraged by these first century letters and we are to be warned.

2. Secondly, these are not anonymous letters.

There is no question as to who delivered the content to John the apostle. Each letter begins with the signature of Christ. Notice Revelation 2:1b.

... The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

If we work backward into Revelation chapter 1, we discover, as we have previously discussed, that this is the person of God the Son.

Notice Revelation 2:8b.

... The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

Again, Jesus Christ signs His name to the letter.

These letters are not hit-and-run incidents. This is not some ornery anonymous mail that we read and try to forget because we cannot respond to the author.

I regularly receive anonymous mail – from people who hate the church or hate some stand we have taken. Every once in a while I get mail from people who do not like me – if you can imagine that. Before I even open the envelope, I can tell it is going to be anonymous. It will be in a plain envelope with no return address, and on plain white paper – always typed.

I am encouraged to remember that Charles Spurgeon, the well-known pastor of London in the 1800s, received by courier every Monday morning, a letter, anonymously written, criticizing the sermon he had delivered the day before.

D. L. Moody, the founder of the Bible Institute and a great church in Chicago where thousands of people have attended, was once sitting on the platform during a morning worship service when an usher delivered to him a folded piece of paper. He opened it to simply read one word in large letters, “FOOL”. He folded the letter back and sat there until it was time for him to preach. He got up and opened the note and said, “I have just received a note from someone today which simply reads, ‘Fool’.” The audience gasped. Then Moody went on to say, “I have often received mail in which the person has written a message to me without signing their name, however, this time, someone has signed his name without writing a message.”

In a matter of twenty-four hours, these seven churches will receive the letter of their lives – a letter signed by Christ Himself.

3. Thirdly, these letters follow the same pattern.

The pattern includes:

- first, they all begin with a characteristic of Christ;
- second, there is a compliment or two from Christ;
- third, there is criticism from Christ;
- finally, there is correction or a challenge from Christ.

We can almost think of Christ as having His own style of writing personal letters.

It is a great pattern to follow, by the way, when we review our employees or our children. Use compliments before criticism and do not forget to give clear corrective measures for them to take.

Let us look at one more observation.

4. Fourthly, even though these letters are addressed to churches, they are for the self-examination of every Christian.

After reading the letter to the Ephesian church, instead of saying, “Yeah, that church sure lost its love for Christ,” we should be asking, “Lord, have the coals of my heart’s love for You grown dark and cold?”

After reading the letter to the church in Sardis, our question should be, “Lord, am I awake and alert?”

After reading the letter to Laodicea, we should ask, “Lord, have I become so captured by my culture that I’ve actually become comfortable with sin?”

These letters have both church-wide implications and personal applications.

Look at Revelation 2:7a.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. . . .

By the way, do not miss the fact that this revelation has now been attributed to God the Father (1:1), God the Son (1:18), and God the Holy Spirit (2:7) equally.

The triune God is involved in His church.

The Spirit brings the invitation at the end of each letter.

This phrase appears in every one of the letters (Revelation 2:11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22),

He who has an ear, let him hear . . .

What an odd phrase this is to the English reader. This does not say, “He who has good hearing . . .”, but, “He who has an ear . . .”.

You might have rushed here to church from home this morning. You got the kids ready, shoved them into the minivan, hopped in, and halfway here, realized you had forgotten your Bible – and maybe you forgot to shave.

Last Sunday, I was late getting here myself. When I was ready to attach my microphone, I realized I had forgotten my belt. There are reasons I button my coat!

Perhaps you came here and realized you had forgotten your glasses, or your contact lenses, or maybe you had forgotten your teeth – probably not.

However, we normally do not forget our ears. They have a way of sticking with us, right?

This phrase is the biblical way of asking, “Are you listening?” It is not as much, “Do you have ears?” as, “Are you using your ears?” In fact, it is

not really referring to hearing with your physical ear, but with your spiritual hearing aides; that is, a submissive heart and a willing mind. These letters will test this kind of hearing.

Every letter will end by delivering a personal challenge that you and I are to take to heart, not just as members of a local body, but as individual members of the body of Christ. These letters are a special delivery – sent by way of heaven’s inspired delivery service – from the heart of Christ to ours. Ladies and gentlemen, this mail is for you and me – from God.

Commendations from Christ in the Letter to Ephesus

To the church in Ephesus, Jesus Christ will begin with four wonderful compliments. Before He tells them what they are doing wrong, He tells them what they are doing right.

We should try this pattern at home, at work, in the classroom where we teach – commend first, then correct.

Let me give at least four things the church body was doing right in Ephesus.

1. Diligence.

Christ says, in Revelation 2:2a,

I know your deeds . . .

The church in Ephesus was energetic and active. It was bustling with activity. It matched its dedication to the dedication of the citizens of Ephesus to Diana, the goddess they worshiped.

Diana’s temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Alexander the Great had offered all the wealth from his military campaigns to only have his name inscribed somewhere upon this temple, but even he was refused.

The temple stood on a platform measuring over 100,000 square feet – twice the size of a football field. The temple was supported by more than 100 pillars. Unlike many columns in ancient days that were constructed of several blocks of stone stacked on top of each other to form a column, all 127 of this temple’s columns were single stones – 55 feet tall.ⁱⁱ

At one end of this magnificent temple, overlaid with gold and jewels and intricate carvings, was an inner shrine where the goddess statue was kept. Behind her were vaults which served as the bank of the ancient world.

Historians called this temple the First Century Bank of England.ⁱⁱⁱ

Everything revolved around the temple to Diana. People came from all around to purchase Ephesian letters – little charms that they believed contained magical, spiritual powers.

This is much like people today buying crystals and hanging them on their rear view mirrors, believing that magical energy flows through them. People are no less superstitious today than the Ephesians.

You may remember the trade unions rioting when Paul delivered the gospel to the Ephesians and that many were converted. A leading craftsman of shrines to Diana named Demetrius said,

Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence. (Acts 19:27)

This started a riot and the people of the city piled into the outdoor theater, which sat more than 25,000, and chanted for two hours,

. . . “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:28)

They were committed to their religion.

Then, Paul, who stayed in Ephesus longer than any other city, won many of them to Christ. Later, Timothy will pastor these people and John the apostle will write, according to tradition, the Gospel of John while working in this church as pastor as well, before being exiled to Patmos.

These new believers filled the ranks of the church and they were as committed and dedicated to Christ as they once had been to the goddess Diana.

Jesus Christ commends their diligence.

He then commends them for a second reason.

2. Determination.

Christ also says, in Revelation 2:2a,

I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance . . .

The word “toil” is from “κόπος (κοπος),” and it refers not just to work, but working to the point of weariness and exhaustion.^{iv}

The word for “perseverance” is a word that refers to bearing up under difficult circumstances.

Jesus Christ says, “Listen, I know everything about all the difficulties you’re facing. I see your

determination to press on for Me and I commend you for that!”

Christ further commends the Ephesian church for disciplining the unrepentant sinner and the false teacher.

3. Discipline.

Notice further in Revelation 2:2,

. . . and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not . . .

Paul would have been thrilled to hear this commendation from Christ. The church had kept their theological truths in tact. They had kept the faith undiluted and unpolluted.

Paul had specifically given the church at Ephesus this warning before he left them and later died,

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore be on the alert . . .

(Acts 20:29-31a)

Now, sixty years later, Christ commends the church for their discipline of the immoral man and the charlatan. The depraved are removed for their unwillingness to repent of sin and the deceiving teachers are removed for the desire to teach things people want to hear to draw them after themselves.

Later in this letter, the Lord mentions another purifying activity. In Revelation 2:6, He says,

Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Notice they do not hate the Nicolaitans; they hate the *deeds* of the Nicolaitans.

Who were the Nicolaitans?

Some scholars believe they were followers of Nicolas, one of the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food in Acts 6. He was presumably among the first who would become deacons.

Whatever the origin, the beliefs of the Nicolaitans were well documented. They basically compromised their faith in order to indulge in sinful practices of the Ephesian society. They argued that the believer could dabble in idolatry – buy the charms and visit the temple, as well as participate in Caesar worship. They also allowed for sexual activity outside of marriage.^v

Basically they said the Nicolaitans were Christians, but lived and acted like their world.

Does this sound familiar? Do you know someone who says they are a Christian but they pursue the idols of our culture in its lust for power and material things and they compromise and defend their sexual activity outside of marriage as something that certainly does not mean they are not a Christian?

In this verse, Jesus Christ commends this church for hating such a lifestyle, and adds,

. . . which I also hate.

Can you imagine doing something and then hearing Christ say, “I hate that.”?

This letter was written to you – to evaluate your own life.

Clement of Alexandria, a church father living seventy-five years after this letter was delivered to Ephesus, said, “The Nicolaitans abandon themselves to pleasure like goats . . . leading lives of self-indulgence.”^{vi}

Jesus Christ goes on to praise this body of believers, not only for their diligence, determination and discipline, but for a fourth reason.

4. Devotion.

John records the words of Christ in Revelation 2:3.

and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary.

In other words, “You haven’t quit.”

Why?

“For My name’s sake – not for your name’s sake. Not so that everyone would know about your church and say, ‘You’re that church. You are the church founded by Paul and pastored by Timothy. And John’s a member of your church and he’s the great author of the Gospel . . .’”

You are the only church in the New Testament to which two apostles addressed letters . . . you are the church of the day.^{vii}

No, “You’ve done all this for the name of Jesus Christ, the One who is the first and last, the One who was dead, but is now alive, the One who has the keys to death and the grave.”

Correction from Christ in the Letter to Ephesus

Now, after all of the commendations for the church at Ephesus for their diligence and their

determination and their discipline and their devotion, Christ says in Revelation 2:4,

But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

This is all Christ says. What does He mean?

A clue is provided in Revelation 2:5a when the Lord provides correction.

Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first . . .

In other words, “Here’s what you are to do; here are three actions to take on your part:

- first, remember from where you have fallen;
- secondly, repent;
- thirdly, return – do the deeds you did at first.”

The word “first” – first deeds – is the same Greek word used for first love. He is telling them to, “do the deeds like you did at first and love like you loved at first.”

What was the church in Ephesus like in its beginning days?

Paul writes to them in their early years and commends them in chapter 1 of the book of Ephesians with the words,

. . . [I have] heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which exists among you and your love for all the saints, (Ephesians 1:15)

The early church in Ephesus was known for its testimony and work of faith and its love for Christ and one another.

A church which ages is most likely to resist taking steps of – what? – faith. It can also grow cool in its zeal and love for Christ and one another.

This church in Ephesus is now sixty years old.

I was very interested in reading what Ray Stedman had to write on this paragraph. Ray pastored Peninsula Bible Church for over forty years. He writes,

How easy it is over time to become mechanical . . . routine . . . dull. You listen to the word of God or to a powerful sermon or to the testimony of a fellow Christian, and you feel you have heard it all already. You become critical of others. You become complainers. You become more selective in your friendships, singling out only those who match your thinking, your level and your status. Your needs become more and more important in

your thinking and the result is division and schism. We become focused on ourselves, our own agenda, our own programs and our own interests. The frightening thing is that there is nothing particularly unique about the Ephesian crisis. We have all been “Ephesian” in our faith at one time or another. And the light of the church flickers, falters and fails.^{viii}

What is the answer?

Jesus Christ provides it in three verbs in Revelation 2:5.

1. Remember.

The problem began with our minds straying from the truth, so begin the battle in the mind. Remember.

Remember who you are in Christ. Remember the power of the gospel which saved you. Remember your perverse heart and the need to depend on Christ. Remember!

This is great and godly advice not only for the church to rekindle the coals of love for Christ and the saints, but for a husband and wife.

Wives, remember what life was like without him. You are probably thinking, “Peaceful.”

Remember what caught your attention. Remember the gift she was from God. Remember how you made it through those early years without two nickels to rub together.

Now you have two nickels and that is all, right?

Remember what mattered most then.

2. Repent!

Stop wandering. Turn your back on sin. Stop calling it something else, like the Nicolaitans.

Refuse to ignore pride or excuse lust. Walk away from the material pursuits of your Ephesian culture.

Take your hand off the back door. Refuse to accept any rationale for divorce. Stop flirting with adultery.

Refuse to cheat on your tests or cut corners on your business expense reports.

Repent, which means, do an about face. Walk in the opposite direction.

3. Return.

Do the deeds you did at first.

Pursue your relationship with Christ – make Him the priority in your thinking; begin a conversation with Him that goes on and off and on and off throughout the day.

Return to some of the activities that made a difference in the life of your spouse or family.

This is the warning to the church in Ephesus, which includes the ominous words in Revelation 2:5b, “Do these things,”

*. . . **or else** . . . I will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent.*

Simply put, “No love – no light.”

The candlestick represents the testimony of the church shining into the community.

While Christ has promised to build His church universal (Matthew 16:18), He does not guarantee any individual congregation permanence and effective ministry.

Today there is little to no evangelical witness from a church in Ephesus.

We happen to have thousands of towns in America today without one effective church preaching the truth and reaching their community with the light of the gospel.

There are church buildings and congregations, but no light. There are budgets and potlucks, but no love for Christ and His gospel, and no love for one another.

Churches will meet today in this city; in this county. They will turn on the lights, but they will have no spiritual light. Their lampstand was taken away some time ago.

- Maybe it was a board meeting where evangelism got nixed as too controversial.
- Maybe it was a congregational meeting where the members voted out the pastor for preaching salvation through Christ alone.
- Maybe it was a pastor who preached that it was time to open the membership of the church to practicing homosexuals.
- Maybe it was a ladies’ meeting where they sat and gossiped about the newest family in the church.
- Maybe it was the teen leader who took his kids to the beach where he and several of the kids got drunk.

These are real situations that threaten the lampstand of the church being taken away.

- Maybe it was one among the 90% of a thousand churches surveyed some time ago that, when asked, “What is the mission of your church?” responded with answers that basically and categorically declared, “The

church exists to take care of my family and the needs of my family.” In other words, “The church exists for me.”

Our first love for Christ has turned inward.

Our first deeds for others have turned inward.

We now love ourselves and serve ourselves.

Christ says, “If you won’t remember and repent and repeat, I’m coming to take away your lampstand. You can carry on without Me.”

I do not hear Christ speaking with anger in this. I hear grief in His voice; I hear great sadness.

I wonder how long the average church would operate before realizing the Holy Spirit no longer had anything to do with their church.

Today, nothing is left of the church in Ephesus but a memory . . . and a letter . . . and a warning.^{ix}

Do you have ears to hear? Are you listening – are your ears spiritually tuned to hear the Savior?

Christ closes in Revelation 2:7 with a reminder that for those who love Him and repent, they are the overcomers – a term for believers. Their inheritance is heaven – which includes a new earth – a return to a Garden where they will enjoy the fellowship and intimate communion with God that Adam and Eve once had, eating from,

. . . the tree of life . . . yielding its fruit every month . . . (Revelation 22:2)

Conclusion

Let me make some closing observations from this letter to Ephesus and to us.

1. It is possible to be busy for God without being a blessing for God.

In other words, it is possible to have religious efforts without redemptive effects; it is possible to have sacred activity without any lasting spiritual value.

2. It is possible to be persevering for orthodoxy and not have the power of deity.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

If I have the gifts of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith . . .

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

(I Corinthians 13:2-3)

Defend the faith, hold strong your doctrine, and know that all the while the Lord may be saying, “I am coming to take away your lampstand, not because of what you believe, but because of the way you behave – you behave without love.”

3. It is possible to have a lofty reputation outside the church without having loving relationships inside the church.

Might I add, it is possible to hide behind a reputation and a smattering of good deeds, but Christ began this letter with the words, “I know. I know all about you.”

I found it interesting to read that a few years ago, on New Year’s Day, the annual Tournament of Roses Parade was being telecast to millions of viewers, as always. Suddenly, a beautiful float sputtered and stalled right in front of the cameras. The designers and workers had created this magnificent float, caring for every detail, meticulously, but one – gasoline in the tank. The whole parade was held up until someone could get a gas can and solve the problem. Millions of people saw it all.

The irony of this is that the float represented the Standard Oil Company. There it was, with the company logo, representing incredible resources, and yet the truck pulling the float had run out of gas.

We represent the blazing light of glory; we represent the light of the world. We belong to the Shekinah glory! And our light flickers and fades out of view.

Is this an issue of salvation? No. It is possible to have a redeemed soul and a wasted life. It is possible for a church to have an effective past, without a productive future.

What do we do?

Remember! Remember the priority of your love. Rekindle the coals that lie dormant from lack of attention and discipline and conviction. Remember where you left them.

Repent! Do an about face. Admit your need for a rekindled fire of devotion for God. Repent; get rid of stuff that pours water on the coals of your heart for God. Take steps today – burn some bridges in your life that just might start a fire again in your heart.

Repeat! Start over where you veered off the track. Track your way back and solicit the help of godly friends. Trace the foot prints that lead you back home. And start over again.

It struck me that Christ did not reproach the Ephesians for having to start over. I am convinced that the Christian life is filled with starting over again and again.

Remember; repent; repeat.
It just might save your marriage. It just might save your testimony.
It just might save your church.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/3/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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- ⁱ Robert L. Thomas, Revelation: Volume One (Moody Press, 1992), p. 93.
ⁱⁱ Edward Hindson, Revelation: Unlocking the Future (AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 35.
ⁱⁱⁱ William Barclay, Letters to the Seven Churches (Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 15.
^{iv} Fritz Reinecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 815.
^v Life Application Bible Commentary: Revelation (Tyndale, 2000), p. 23.
^{vi} John MacArthur, Revelation: Volume 1 (Moody Press, 1999), p. 61.
^{vii} John Phillips, Exploring Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), p. 41.
^{viii} Ray C. Stedman, Understanding Revelation: God's Final Word (Discovery House, 1991), p. 29.
^{ix} Lehman Strauss, Revelation (Loizeaux Brothers, 1964), p. 39.