

Losing Your First Love

Author: Larry W. Wilson

The Way

During His brief ministry (A.D. 27–30), Jesus established a new religion that continues to stand in direct opposition to the other religions of the world. At first, this religion was called "The Way" because Jesus said of Himself, "I am *the way* and the truth and the life . . ." (John 14:6; Acts 9:2; 19:9, italics mine)

As the movement grew in size and notoriety, the Jews and other groups became offended by the name of the movement because the title, "*The Way*," inferred there was *no other way* to God. Jesus underscored this point by making claims that were very hard for people of other religions to believe.

For example, what would you have thought if you were a devout Jew and heard a young carpenter from Nazareth say, ". . . No one comes to the Father except through *me*."? (John 14:6, italics mine) What would you have thought if you were a member of Israel's clergy and you heard the following statement from a young fisherman from Galilee? "Salvation is found in no one else [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Because the name of "The Way" prompted so much controversy during those early years, the name of the movement was changed to "Christians." (Acts 11:26)

Even though the Jews severely persecuted the Christians, Jerusalem served as the headquarters of Christianity for forty years. The Romans considered Christians a sect *within* Judaism due to the similarities between the two religions. (Acts 24:14) Because Rome hated the Jews, they also hated Christians.

To the Roman mind – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Christians were Jewish sects. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, they destroyed both the temple of the Jews and "the command and control center" of Christianity. This was God's plan. God destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Matthew 23; 24:2; Luke 21:24) for the same reason He destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (Jeremiah 25; 27:6,7) In both cases, the nation of Israel had passed the point of redemption.

After the Roman general Titus destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, God gave the temple site to others and the Jews have not been able to rebuild their temple. They cannot rebuild the temple as long as the Arab mosque, The Dome of the Rock, is on the temple mount. (For reasons why the Jewish temple cannot be located elsewhere, see Deuteronomy 16:11; 1 Chronicles 21; 2 Chronicles 3:1)

When God destroyed Jerusalem, He also eliminated the headquarters of Christianity for at least four reasons: First, the fleeing refugees spread the news of salvation through Christ throughout

the world. Second, when God removed Christianity from Jerusalem, He established Christianity as a religion distinct and separate from Judaism.

Third, fleeing Christians carried the love of Christ *into* the cultures of the nations where they fled. This showed that Christianity neither favors, nor is limited to ethnic origin or culture. Last, when God decentralized the authority of the Christian Church, he encouraged Christian doctrine to expand and become more Christ centered than if it had remained within the paradigms of its Jewish origin. God is so wise. Everything He does is timely and comprehensive.

God delayed destroying Jerusalem for forty years after Jesus ascended to give the Christian movement time to mature. If God had destroyed Jerusalem sooner, Christianity may have disbanded. If He had waited too long, Jewish paradigms and customs may have engulfed Christianity.

Pseudo-Christian Churches

Shortly after Jesus returned to Heaven in A.D. 30, God sent the apostle Paul throughout the Roman empire to establish Christian churches. (Acts 13:2) Paul's work among the Gentiles was fruitful and his tireless work proved to be a great blessing for Christians.

When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Christian refugees found a network of helpful brothers and sisters in cities where Paul had established a church! This point is pertinent to this study because some churches in Asia were beginning to slip into apostasy at this time.

About twenty-five years after the destruction of Jerusalem, the apostle John was exiled to the isle of Patmos because of his faith in Jesus and loyalty to the Word of God. (Revelation 1:9) While John was incarcerated there, God gave him seven messages for seven churches in Asia Minor. These messages are recorded in Revelation 2 and 3 and they are not very flattering. Think about it! Jesus established His church before returning to Heaven in A.D. 30 and just sixty-five years later, He threatened to abandon some of the churches in Asia Minor!

In our last study, we learned that pseudo-Christians are people who *pretend* to be loyal to Jesus Christ. The essential difference between a pseudo-Christian and a Christian is the direction of love. A Christian loves in an outward direction – he loves Jesus with all his heart, mind and soul and his neighbor as himself. (Matthew 22:36-40)

A pseudo-Christian loves in an inward direction – he loves himself, his convenience, his friends, his assets, his self-respect and the approval of others more than God's approval. With this definition of Christians and pseudo-Christians in mind, we will examine the message sent to Ephesus in Revelation 2 and discover why Jesus was upset with the church members at Ephesus.

The Vision

"On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which

said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.' " (Revelation 1:10,11)

When God gave this vision to John, there were many Christian churches in Asia Minor. However, Jesus chose to address these seven churches because the problems in these seven churches reflect the Christian experience *at all times*. The number seven indicates fullness or completeness.

In this sense, the messages sent to the seven churches are timeless and universal. Every Christian church today reflects, in one way or another, aspects of the seven churches in Asia Minor, therefore, each Christian would do well to consider the words of Jesus. It does not take too much soul searching to discover which church has our "membership."

Ephesus

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:1-7)

The salutation to Ephesus begins with, "To *the angel* of the church in Ephesus . . ." The salutation to the church at Ephesus was directed *to the angel* of the church in Ephesus because a specific angel was responsible for the church at Ephesus. Notice how this unfolds. When the vision began, John saw Jesus walking among seven candlesticks and Jesus had seven stars in His right hand. (Revelation 1:12-16) Each candlestick represents a church and each star represents an angel assigned to a church. (Revelation 1:20)

These seven angels stand before God (Revelation 8:2) and they are delighted to do whatever God commands. In this case, God assigned each of the seven angels a church and each angel had the responsibility of seeing that his entrusted message reached its destination. In other words, God commanded seven angels to make sure that each church received the testimony of Jesus.

This is not unusual because God uses angels to accomplish specific tasks. The apostle Paul wrote, "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14)

Jesus identified Himself to the church at Ephesus as the One "who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." Jesus used this descriptive language to show that He has authority over the seven angels of the seven churches (they are in the palm of His hand). "Walking among the lampstands" means that though He is not physically present in each church, Jesus is vigilant over His church and He knows the condition of each member.

Jesus commended the people at Ephesus for their perseverance and fidelity to righteousness in the face of persecution. Jesus also commended the people at Ephesus for testing those who claimed to be apostles (the Greek word for apostle means "one sent by God"). The church at Ephesus had tested certain so-called apostles and found them to be infiltrators sent by the devil.

However, Jesus also told the church He was unhappy with them because they had lost their first love for Him. The joy and enthusiasm of their first love had died. The church at Ephesus had become stagnant and ritualistic and Jesus threatened to remove their lampstand from His presence if they did not repent of this apostasy.

A dynamic Christian life can stall and lose its first love experience for Jesus. What causes a Christian to become a pseudo-Christian? The answer is simple. When the direction of our love changes, a transformation occurs. A Christian loves in an outward direction and a pseudo-Christian loves in an inward direction.

This is a critical point because every Christian faces two deadly forces each day. The first enemy is our carnal nature and the second enemy is the devil. Every day our carnal nature is a self-resurrecting monster which begs for attention. The devil knows this. Our carnal nature constantly asserts itself and demands to be first and the devil preys on this inclination.

Paul said he had to put his carnal nature to death every day. "I die every day – I mean that, brothers – just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord." (1 Corinthians 15:31) The only way a carnal nature can be put to death is through the renewing power of God's love. If a Christian does not drink in God's Word, he or she loses touch with God.

If a Christian is too busy to pray about the stresses and temptations of life, he or she becomes weak in resolve and purpose. Christian life is like the banner I recently saw on a church billboard, "One week without Bible study and prayer makes one weak."

Jesus was unhappy with Ephesus because the problem at Ephesus was deadly. For Christians today, the loss of "first love" for Jesus is a telltale sign indicating the carnal nature is dominant and winning the battle for control. If left unchecked, the Christian church at Ephesus would become a pseudo-Christian church.

Think about this. Jesus indicated He would abandon the church at Ephesus. Do you think Jesus has abandoned any church today? Is it possible for people to attend a worship service and Jesus is not present? Do you think Jesus is present every time you go to church? Is it possible for churches to lose their first love? The message sent to Ephesus is a timeless message from

Jesus. If we lose that first love, we lose Jesus.

Jesus said, "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Nicolas, of Alexandria, Egypt, was a pseudo-Christian. Nicolas was a very bright philosopher of that time and he skillfully merged some of Jesus' teachings with ideas originating in the philosophies of gnosticism (pronounced nos-ti-cism). Gnosticism is a philosophy or a series of logical beliefs that attempts to explain good and evil through so-called "higher knowledge."

Gnosticism began in the hedonistic philosophies of the Greeks and Romans, as well as the creeds of Plato and Philo. Gnosticism also included many ideas borrowed from the mystical religions of India and Persia. When merged with the teachings of Jesus, gnosticism corrupted the teachings of Jesus to a point where there were few truths and even fewer absolutes. First century A.D. gnostics treated the Word of God as though it were an allegory (or a parable having many shades of meaning).

Even though various schools of thought existed within gnosticism, gnostic philosophy is merely an empty collection of brilliant philosophical justifications for carnal behavior. Today, gnosticism is called "moral relevancy."

We do not know which philosophies of Nicolas the church at Ephesus rejected. However, Jesus commended the church for preventing their subtle invasion. Jesus closed His remarks to the church at Ephesus saying, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." The phrase "He who has an ear . . ." means there is a message hidden in these words that a pseudo-Christian ear will not appreciate. (For this reason, Jesus often spoke in parables when He was on Earth.)

The hidden message for those who overcome the loss of their first love is this: God will enormously reward everyone who overcomes the temptations and cravings of the carnal nature. Overcomers will be given the right to eat from the Tree of Life.

God did not allow Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Life after they sinned because the fruit of this tree perpetually sustains life. (Genesis 3:23,24) All who have the right to eat from this tree will live forever. Even more, the promise of Jesus indicates that overcoming the carnal nature is possible. Through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, we can keep the carnal nature submissive to the spiritual nature. (Romans 8) I cannot think of anything better than overcoming my carnal nature and living in the kingdom of God forever. Can you?

Take the quiz: Questions and answers from this article:

(click question for the answer)

1. Why were the followers of Jesus eventually called Christians?

To reduce prejudice.

2. Why did the Romans hate Christians?

The Romans thought Christians were a sect of Jews.

3. Why did God destroy Jerusalem a second time?

God destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. because of apostasy.

4. What did the destruction of Jerusalem do for Christianity?

The destruction of Jerusalem forced Christians to carry the love of Jesus and the gospel throughout the world. Christianity became distinctly separate from its Jewish origin. Christian doctrine became more Christ centered.

5. What was Jesus' complaint with the church at Ephesus?

Ephesus had lost its first love.

6. What causes a loss of first love?

Allowing the carnal nature to resurrect itself and become dominate.

7. What did Jesus promise to do if Ephesus did not repent?

Jesus promised to abandon the church.

8. What did Jesus promise to those who overcome the loss of their first love?

Overcomers will have the right to eat from the tree of life and live forever.

9. What is gnosticism?

Gnosticism was a faulty philosophy about good and evil that Jesus hated.

10. Identify some evidences of losing that first love for Jesus

Loss of interest in spiritual matters. A greater interest in the temporal things of this life. No time for prayer and Bible study. Compromise with sin and indifference to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.