

ABANDONED LOVE

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 2:1-7
Third Message
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Revelation 2:1-7

"You have hurt me more than anyone else has ever hurt me."

Thirty years later, I can still hear my friend saying these words to me over the phone. We were talking one evening after school. This is what people used to do with phones: we talked to each other.

From my perspective, my friend and I had grown apart. We used to be close and spend a lot of time together. But for whatever reason, we had drifted apart. Other friends become more important. Interests had diverged. I thought it was simply a natural transition in relationships.

She felt differently. She felt betrayed. She felt abandoned. "You have hurt me more than anyone else has ever hurt me."

We're in the middle of a series on the book of Revelation called "Wake Up." We've chosen that title from Revelation 3:2 because we think it's a good summary of how we need to respond to this book. For most of us, we haven't gone astray. We haven't rejected God. If anything, we've just fallen asleep. We need to be confronted again with the dramatic reality of who God is and how he works in the world.

The book of Revelation opens with a dramatic vision of Jesus. Immediately following is a series of seven letters addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor. The first letter is to the church of Ephesus, the largest of the cities in the area. It's the church we are most familiar with. It's the church we know the most about. But the letter they receive is one of the harshest letters of the seven.

The letter describes a painful relationship. A relationship which has been damaged, almost beyond repair. This letter describes abandoned love.

Remember, the entire book of Revelation is a letter. We saw that in chapter 1. This whole book is a letter to the churches of Asia Minor at the end of the first century.

This is one of the most forgotten aspects of the book of Revelation. This is a letter giving instruction to a group of churches in the first century.

This particular letter is written to a community on the Mediterranean coast of the in the first century. This letter isn't written to us. But the question we have to ask is "Could it have been written to us?" Are there any similarities between what was happening in the first century in Ephesus and what's happening in the twenty-first century in the Bay Area?

I think there are.

In fact, I think this letter, more so than any of the others, applies to us. And that's a sobering thought. If that's true, it means that we are in a risky position. We are not as great as we think we are. Last week we celebrated 70 years of history as a church. What will the future look like?

Each of the letters in this section of Revelation follows a similar pattern. There is the command to write the letter. Then there is a description of Jesus. Then something about the church is commended or praised. Something else about the church is rebuked or criticized. There is an exhortation toward some kind of action. Then a notice to pay attention. And finally, a promise about a possible reward for obedience.

Command. Description of Jesus. Commendation. Rebuke. Exhortation. Notice. And a promise.

This morning we're going to start by reading the whole letter, then we'll walk through each of those seven sections.

Revelation 2:1-7:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.' 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have

tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

As I said, we're going to walk through each of the seven sections of this letter. So this sermon won't have three points. It will have seven. We'll make a brief observation about each element. Then we'll try to apply that to our own situation.

This letter is not complicated. The main point is abundantly clear. These people have abandoned love. There's a bit to figure out in terms of what that means, but mostly we want to be asking a difficult but important question about ourselves this morning.

Have we abandoned love? Have we given up on relationship in favor of performance, sound doctrine, and good works? Do we have love?

The command to write

Our passage opens with a simple instruction for the letter to be written.

Revelation 2:1a:

To the angel of the church in Ephesus...

There are a few things to say here at the beginning. First, we know a lot about the church in Ephesus. We know more than we know about any of the other six churches.

We know about their dramatic mass conversion described in Acts 19. People who practiced magic arts brought their books to burn—probably the equivalent of around 15 million dollars worth. We know about the massive town riot that erupted because of that conversion.

We know that Paul spent several years in that city, planting and caring for the church there. He wrote the letter of Ephesians to the church. He wrote the letters of 1 and 2 Timothy to the pastor of that church. Ephesus was a model church which received a lot of attention in the Bible.

There was something special about Ephesus. But there was also something broken. According to this letter, there seemed to have been something deeply broken. And God wanted it to be fixed. God wanted for this special church to not just be special, but to be healthy.

God cares about places. He cares about unique locations in unique times. In the Old Testament, cities are personified when they are described. Cities have a character and personality. God cares about places. He cares about unique locations in unique times. In the Old Testament, cities are personified when they are described. Cities have a character and personality. God seems to feel a unique fondness for each place described.

We are a special place. I'm convinced God feels a unique fondness for this church. Not that he likes us better than anywhere else. But there is something special.

And because of that, I think you are here for a reason. Not just here in the broad sense, but here in this room at this time, at this church, whether you're visiting or plugged in.

Lately as a church we've been using the tagline "Following Jesus in Silicon Valley." It's important that we realize that we live in a certain geography. Don't just follow Jesus. Follow Jesus here. Follow Jesus in Silicon Valley.

My wife and I settled in the Bay Area twelve years ago because we felt God calling us here. Not everyone can live here. We could. Not everyone wants to. We did (or at least I did). I felt the call of God strongly to be in this place and at this church because of what God had planned.

Maybe you feel the same way. I know that some of you do. Maybe you don't feel that way. But you're in this room today. I think that means that God has a plan for you here at least for today. A friend of mine who pastors another church in the Bay Area likes to say "geography equals mandate." That means where you live has a lot to do with the specific ways God is calling you to follow him.

These letters prove that point. This letter was written to the Ephesians. They had something particular they had to do. What letter would be written to us today? What would Jesus say if he commanded "to the angel of the church in the Bay Area?" How can we take our geography seriously?

Walking among the churches

Following the command to write, we hear a description of Jesus. He is portrayed as being one who,

Revelation 2:1b:

...walks among the seven golden lampstands...

Where in the Bible have we heard about seven golden lampstands?

Nowhere. In the Old Testament temple, we do have golden lampstands, but there were ten, not seven.

In the first chapter, we are told that these lampstands represent the churches. Lampstands belong in a temple. They represent something holy. But there are seven of them. The same number of days that the earth was created in. These lampstands aren't in the temple. They are in the world. Jesus walks among the lampstands which are supposed to represent him to the world.

It's a picture of authority and intimacy and connection and knowledge. Jesus is here. He is the head of this church. We have always been explicit about that around here. The staff is not the head of this church. The elders are not the head. Jesus is the head of the church. We are all his bride. This church belongs to Jesus.

How do you like it when someone breaks something that belongs to you?

This church belongs to Jesus. He is among us. We ought to take that seriously. And the Ephesian church did, to some extent. What comes next is a list of some incredible things they were doing well.

A powerful commendation

Jesus details several things this church was excelling at. It is an incredible resume.

Revelation 2:2-3:

...works, toil, and patient endurance,...

...cannot bear with those who are evil...

...tested those who call themselves apostles...

...not grown weary...

If we had to pick from all the nice things that Jesus says about any of the churches, most of us would probably pick this list. Faithfulness. Purity of doctrine. No tolerance for lies or evildoers. Endurance. These are all amazing. We want to be all of these things.

And in large measure, I'd say these things are true of us at PBC. We've done a lot of great stuff. We've worked hard. We have endured patiently through generations of ministry. We're careful to stay far away from evil. We spend a lot of time making sure to test ideas and people so that we're confident they are legitimate. And we're still going. We haven't given up.

It's no accident of the Spirit that this message comes the week after we celebrate our 70th anniversary as a church. These are precisely the things which we celebrated last week. We can continue to celebrate those things. We can celebrate faithfulness.

I've gotten to know a lot of other pastors in the Bay Area over the past few years. This is how we're known as a church. We do have these kinds of things going for us.

And these are great things. Jesus commends these. Please don't walk away this morning thinking any of these things are unimportant. They are absolutely critical aspects of being the church. They are the kinds of things that come with maturity and wisdom.

These are all great things. But they are also a bit inward looking. Is there a tendency for a church to become more conservative and defensive as time progresses? Do you start to worry more about making mistakes than tackling new problems? Do you try to protect what you have going on instead of expanding into new areas?

This is where the letter to Ephesus takes a sharp turn. As incredible as faithfulness is, it doesn't seem to be enough. In the next part of the letter, Jesus gives one of the most severe accusations in all of the seven letters.

Accused of abandoned love

The phrase Jesus uses here is chilling.

Revelation 2:4b:

You have abandoned the love you had at first.

Greek literature is fond of a device called a chiasm, where the center of a section is highlighted as the most important. Within this letter, this phrase occupies the exact center. Sixty-seven Greek words come before it. Sixty-seven Greek words come after it. Right in the middle of the letter is the climax and focus, "*You have abandoned the love you had at first.*"

This is a strong statement. The word for "abandoned" is a powerful and complex word. At times, it's translated "forgive," other times "divorce," other times "depart from." It's translated later in this chapter as "tolerate." The core idea of the word is a sense of distance or separation. In forgiveness, distance is good—our sins are sent far away. But in love, distance is bad. "*You have abandoned love.*"

People often interpret this sentence as a reference to passion or enthusiasm. Something like, "You used to be excited about your faith, but now you're just going through the motions." But that isn't what this phrase refers to.

I've known passionate people who have no love. I've known enthusiastic and energetic and fervent people who aren't just going through motions. They are focused and driven and confident of their actions. But their actions don't have anything to do with love.

The church at Ephesus had abandoned love. It's the word "*agape*"—sacrificial, other-focused, listening, initiating, patient, kind love. This is not a feeling. The next verse encourages them to do the "actions" they did at first. This is active love made real by decisions and time, and energy.

Most of the time the word "*agape*" is used in the New Testament, it refers to either the love God has for us, or the love we have for each other. It's rare that this word is used to describe our love toward God. So if the church has abandoned their actions of love, the reference is to love for each other.

Sometimes we like to stop and ask a lot of questions. Could it be love for God? Maybe it means we've forgotten God's love for us? Those can be good questions, but they can also be ways to avoid asking this question of ourselves.

Have we abandoned love? Have you abandoned love?

The church in Ephesus had focused on doctrinal purity, patient endurance, faithfulness, and good works. But they forgot love. Does this sound like us at all? Have we abandoned love?

There's a good case to be made that the love in view here has mostly to do with love for the world. In Matthew 24:12, Jesus talks about "the love of many will grow cold." The context of that passage has to do with the Gospel being preached to the nations. The image of the church here is of a lampstand: something that shines the light of God to the world around.

If you think about our love, maybe we do a decent job at loving each other. I've certainly felt loved in this community. And that's important. We don't want to lose that. But have we abandoned our love for the world?

This is a huge deal. The love that Jesus speaks of here is not one aspect of what it means to be a church. The consequence for the church of Ephesus if they don't turn things around is that their lampstand will be removed from its place. In essence, they will stop being a church. They will have lost their very identity as the people of God.

Even though they've been faithful and patient and done good works and fought for doctrinal truth. Even though they did all those great things. If they don't rediscover love, they will not be a church.

Paul says something similar in 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 13: 1-3:

If we have all our doctrine right, but don't have love, we are not a church. If we do great works but don't have love, we are not a church. If we endure patiently and don't grow weary and stay away from evil, but don't have love, we are not a church.

Have we abandoned our love for the world? Does this apply to us?

I've been convicted by this passage. I look around our world and want desperately for people to know the love of Jesus. But there are so many barriers. My time. My energy. How do I develop relationships? I work at a church and my children attend a Christian school. There

are so many needs around me to meet. How do I find time to love the world?

But how can I not?

If it's true that we've abandoned love, what do we do? How do we get it back? How do we move forward? The vision continues with some helpful instruction for us.

Commanded to repent, remember, and do

After this challenging rebuke, the letter to the church at Ephesus gives three very simple imperatives as a solution. They are simple, but difficult.

Remember from where you have fallen

Repent

Do the works you did at first

These commands are incredibly helpful. First, let's notice what isn't here. The church isn't told to wallow in nostalgia. This isn't wistful thinking. They aren't told to wish for the old days and lament how far things have fallen. Each of these imperatives is active and productive.

These words are a path for returning back to love. It's a method for rediscovering *agape*. Remember. Repent. Do.

It starts with remembering. Our Scriptures are full of the theme of remembering. Throughout the Old Testament and everywhere in the New, we are told to remember. There is a deep theological purpose to remembering.

Our memory acts as a filter. We tend to remember significant things. We tend to forget the unimportant. If I look forward to my next week, I might be focused on all the tasks I need to accomplish. Emails, schedules, sermons to write, things to accomplish. Looking forward, I tend to be task oriented.

But when I remember, my memory does something amazing. I don't remember everything that happened. I tend to remember the significant things. Our memory is selective. We mostly filter out the unimportant. Remembering helps us to see what has been significant. Remembering helps us to recognize what parts of life are really important.

We are told particularly to look back on the positive

things that have happened. Remember what God did here. Remember what worked. Remember the kind of love we felt and demonstrated toward others. This gives us a picture of what healthy love looks like in our midst.

Remembering allows us to look at our lives today and repent. Are you allowing yourselves the space for those things which are really important? Do you have the margin to love people? Are you able to love the world around you?

We sometimes think of repentance as feeling back for what we've done. But that's not accurate. It's a turning away from one thing so that you can embrace something else. It's a letting go. A willingness to change. If you're talking about your schedule, repentance is simply saying no to something you've done in the past.

Our history can make this a hard thing for us as a church. Are there things we need to say no to? Are there things we need to stop doing? Not necessarily because they are bad, but because they aren't what God is calling us to anymore.

Finally, after we look back and remember and look at today to repent, we get to work. Do the works you did at first. It doesn't say "recapture the feelings you had at first" or even "stir up the same kind of enthusiasm you had at first." The command is to do the works. Again, this is about action.

Last week we heard from Elaine Stedman about the early days of this church. She said that the Holy Spirit led us to open up to the culture. I can't get that phrase out of my idea. What does it mean for us to "open up to the culture?"

I don't think we're very open to the culture. And honestly, I think the days are past when opening up meant making people feel welcome who might come into our building. Most people in Palo Alto wouldn't dream of setting foot inside a building labeled Peninsula Bible Church.

But that's okay because the church isn't the building. The church is us. So no one needs to come into this building to experience our church. We go to them. And we go as lampstands. Representatives of Jesus to a fallen world. We open up to the culture by loving people. The kingdom does not mostly grow by people coming here. The kingdom grows when we go out there.

This is what we need to remember, repent, and do. Jesus says that if the church at Ephesus don't do that, he will come to them and remove their lampstand. I don't think that's a punishment or some kind of artificial consequence that Jesus will impose. It's just that when a church veers away from love, there isn't any light to shine. The lampstand becomes useless without a lamp. A church without love is just a group of people gathering regularly.

Without light, there is no lampstand. Without love, there is no church. Remember. Repent. Do.

Hear the words to you

Towards the end of the letter, Jesus acknowledges something important. Not everyone can hear these words.

Revelation 2:7a:

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

Do me a favor. Reach up and touch your ears. Let's just confirm a basic fact: all of you in this room have ears. But the reality is that not all of you have ears. Not all of you will hear what the Spirit is saying through these words. A lot of us will walk out of here unchanged and unmoved.

But not everyone. Some of us have ears. The Spirit is here. The Spirit speaks through these words. And some of us have ears to hear.

Elaine also encouraged us to remember that the ministry belongs to the body. That has always been one of our most cherished values at PBC. It's not the pastors who do the ministry. It's the people of the church.

Are you hearing the Spirit this morning? If so, then listen. And know that hearing the Spirit isn't just about recognizing ideas. Hearing the Spirit involves obedience. Hearing involves taking action. Hearing includes doing.

If you're hearing something this morning, run with it. Don't come up and tell me about it and expect me to run with it. Don't sit on it until the Spirit's voice fades away. Don't just hear the words. Run with it. We can help you. We can focus you and empower you.

The promise to conquer

And when you run with it, the promise at the end of the letter awaits. Each of these letters offers something to the one who conquers. In this letter, it is the tree of life.

Revelation 2:7b:

To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life

Some of you know that I have a particular fondness for the tree of life. I've taught entire retreats on this single tree. I consider it one of the most powerful images in all of Scripture. This is an incredible promise. The tree of life represents the rich, beautiful life that we were meant to experience.

We still have a taste of it, but we won't experience the fullness of life until Jesus returns to complete his work. We find out at the end of Revelation that when that happens, we'll once again have access to the tree of life. Life will be all it was meant to be.

We need to understand what is meant here by "conquering." Conquering is not something we do in our strength. That's the surprise twist in this whole book. We conquer by aligning ourselves with Jesus. We suffer alongside him. We submit to him. We follow him wherever he leads us.

It's not up to us to create love. We can't do that. It's up to us to connect to the love of God through Christ. Then we can allow that love to pour through us to each other and the world. We are broken. We are sinful. Anything good we have comes from Christ.

Don't leave this room with a renewed commitment to rediscover love on your own strength. It's not going to work. Christ gives us the fruit of the tree. He died for our sins. He redeems us. Everything we have, everything we do is based on his love for us. If we have abandoned love, it is because we have forgotten his love for us.

Conclusion

Remember my friend in middle school? The one who told me that I had hurt her more than anyone else ever had?

In this letter, Jesus speaks frankly to the church of Ephesus. He tells them they have abandoned their love—

their love for him, their love for each other, their love for the world. They are doing a lot of things right. But none of it matters without love. Love is the critical element.

It's not like they need to add love on top of everything else. Jesus isn't telling them about one more thing they need to do. Love is the foundation of everything. When they have love, they have it all.

You can believe the right things and do the right things and endure and be patient without love.

But when you love as God loves, all of those other things are included. When you love, you end up believing the right things. When you love you do the right things. When you love you endure patiently. When we love, we will be a church which shines for the truth of the Gospel in a dark and hurting world.

If we've abandoned love, let's get it back. Remember. Repent. And Do.