

Message to the Church of Ephesus

Verse 4

Declension from First Love

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." [Revelation 2:4](#).

IT IS A GREAT THING to have as much said in our commendation as was said concerning the church at Ephesus. Just read what "Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness," said of them "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted." Oh, my dear brothers and sisters, we may feel devoutly thankful if we can humbly, but honestly say, that this commendation applies to us. Happy the man whose works are known and accepted of Christ. He is no idle Christian, he has practical godliness; he seeks by works of piety to obey God's whole law, by works of charity to manifest his love to the brotherhood, and by works of devotion to show his attachment to the cause of his Master. "I know thy works." Alas! some of you cannot get so far as that. Jesus Christ himself can bear no witness to your works, for you have not done any. You are Christians by profession, but you are not Christians as to your practice. I say again, happy is that man to whom Christ can say, "I know thy works." It is a commendation worth a world to have as much as that said of us. But further, Christ said, "and thy labour." This is more still. Many Christians have works, but only few Christians have labour.

He was "in labours more abundant." Many were they in the apostle's days who did works for Christ; but pre-eminently the apostle Paul did labour for souls. It is not work merely, it is anxious work; it is casting forth the whole strength, and exercising all the energies for Christ.

Could the Lord Jesus say as much as that of you "I know thy labour?" No. He might say, "I know thy loitering; I know thy laziness; I know thy shirking of the work; I know thy boasting of what little thou dost; I know thine ambition to be thought something of, when thou art nothing." But ah! friends, it is more than most of us dare to hope that Christ could say, "I know thy labour."

In the first place, *what was our first love?* Secondly, *how did we lose it?* And thirdly, *let me exhort you to get it again.*

Now it is that first love that you and I must confess I am afraid we have in a measure lost. Let us just see whether we have it. When we first loved the Saviour how earnest we were; there was not a single thing in the Bible, that we did not think most precious; there was not one command of his that we did not think to be like fine gold and choice silver. Never were the doors of his house open without our being there. if there were a prayer meeting at any hour in the day we were there. Some said of us that we had no patience, we would do too much and expose our bodies too frequently but we never thought of that "Do yourself no harm," was spoken in our ears; but we

would have done anything then. Why there are some of you who cannot walk to the Music Hall on a morning, it is too far. When you first joined the church, you would have walked twice as far. There are some of you who cannot be at the prayer meeting business will not permit; yet when you were first baptized, there was never a prayer meeting from which you were absent. It is the loss of your first love that makes you seek the comfort of your bodies instead of the prosperity of your souls.

That first love does not last half so long as we could wish. Some of you stand convicted even here; you have not that blazing love, that burning love, that ridiculous love as the worldling would call it, which is after all the love to be most coveted and desired. No, you have lost your first love in that respect.

Again, how obedient you used to be. If you saw a commandment, that was enough for you you did it. But now you see a commandment, and you see profit on the other side; and how often do you dally with the profit and choose the temptation, instead of yielding an unsullied obedience to Christ.

Again: when we were in our first love, what would we do for Christ; now how little will we do. Some of the actions which we performed when we were young Christians, but just converted, when we look back upon them, seem to have been wild and like idle tales. You remember when you were a lad and first came to Christ, you had a half-sovereign in your pocket; it was the only one you had, and you met with some poor saint and gave it all away. You did not regret that you had done it, your only regret was that you had not a great deal more, for you would have given all. You recollected that something was wanted for the cause of Christ. Oh! we could give anything away when we first loved the Saviour. If there was a preaching to be held five miles off, and we could walk with the lay-preacher to be a little comfort to him in the darkness, we were off. If there was a Sunday-school, however early it might be, we would be up, so that we might be present. Unheard-of feats, things that we now look back upon with surprise, we could perform them. Why cannot we do them now?

Do you know there are some people who always live upon what they have been. I speak very plainly now. There is a brother in this church who may take it to himself; I hope he will. It is not very many years ago since he said to me, when I asked him why he did not do something "Well, I have done my share; I used to do this, and I have done the other; I have done so-and-so." Oh, may the Lord deliver him, and all of us, from living on "has beens!" It will never do to say we have done a thing. Suppose, for a solitary moment, the world should say, "I have turned round; I will stand still." Let the sea say, "I have been ebbing and flowing, lo! these many years; I will ebb and flow no more." Let the sun say, "I have been shining, and I have been rising and setting so many days; I have done this enough to earn me a goodly name; I will stand still;" and let the moon wrap herself up in veils of darkness, and say, "I have illuminated many a night, and I have lighted many a weary traveller across the moors; I will shut up my lamp and be dark forever." Brethren, when you and I cease to labour, let us cease to live. God has no intention to let us live a useless life. But mark this; when we leave our first works, there is no question about having left our first love; that is sure. If there be strength remaining, if there be still power mentally and physically, if we cease from our office, if we abstain from our labours, there is no solution of this question which an honest conscience will accept, except this, "Thou hast left thy first love, and,

therefore, thou hast neglected thy first works." Ah! we were all so very ready to make excuses for ourselves. Many a preacher has retired from the ministry, long before he had any need to do so. He has married a rich wife. Somebody has left him a little money, and he can do without it. He was growing weak in the ways of God, or else he would have said,

"My body with my charge lay down, And cease at once to work and live."

And let any man here present who was a Sunday-school teacher and who has left it, who was a tract distributor and who has given it up, who was active in the way of God but is now idle, stand to-night before the bar of his conscience, and say whether he be not guilty of this charge which I bring against him, that he has left his first love.

II. And now, beloved, WHERE DID YOU AND I leave OUR FIRST LOVE, if we have lost it?

...

Ah, too much of the world is a bad thing for any man! I question very much whether a man ought not sometimes to stop, and say, "There is an opportunity of doing more trade, but it will require the whole of my time, and I must give up that hour I have set apart for prayer; I will not do the trade at all; I have enough, and therefore let it go. I would rather do trade with heaven than trade with earth." But another reason. Do you not think that perhaps you have forgotten how much you owe to Christ? There is one thing, that I feel from experience I am compelled to do very often, viz., to go back to where I first started:

" I, the chief of sinners am, But Jesus died for me."

You and I get talking about our being saints; we know our election, we rejoice in our calling, we go on to sanctification; and we forget the hole of the pit whence we were digged. Ah, remember my brother, thou art nothing now but a sinner saved through grace; remember what thou wouldst have been, if the Lord had left thee. And surely, then, by going back continually to first principles, and to the great foundation stone, the cross of Christ, thou wilt be led to go back to thy first love. There are a thousand reasons that I might have given, but I leave each of you to search your hearts, to find out why you have lost, each of you, your first love. There is yet another thing, my dear friends, if we lose our first love what will the world say of us if we lose our first love? I must put this, not for our name's sake, but for God's dear name's sake. O what will the world say of us? There was a time, and it is not gone yet, when men must point at this church, and say of it, "There is a church, that is like a bright oasis in the midst of a desert, a spot of light in the midst of darkness." Our prayer meetings were prayer meetings indeed, the congregations were as attentive as they were numerous. Oh, how you did drink in the words; how your eyes flashed with a living fire, whenever the name of Christ was mentioned! And what, if in a little time it shall be said, "Ah, that church is quite as sleepy as any other; look at them when the minister preaches, why they can sleep under him, they do not seem to care for the truth. Look ..., they are just as cold and careless as others; they used to be called the most pugnacious people in the world, for they were always ready to defend their Master's name and their Master's truth, and they got that name in consequence, but now you may swear in their presence and they will not rebuke you: how near these people once used to live to God and his house, they were always there; look at their prayer meetings, they would fill their seats as full at a prayer meeting

as at an ordinary service; now they are all gone back." "Ah," says the world, "just what I said; the fact is, it was a mere spasm, a little spiritual excitement, and it has all gone down." And the worldling says, "Ah, ah, so would I have it, so would I have it!"

... Let the chaff go, but if the wheat remain we have comfort. Let those who are the outer-court worshippers cease to hear, what signifieth? let them turn aside, but O, ye soldiers of the Cross, if ye turn your backs in the day of battle, where shall I hide my head? what shall I say for the great name of my Master, or for the honour of his gospel? It is our boast and joy, that the old-fashioned doctrine has been revived in these days, and that the truth ... that Paul preached, and that Jesus preached, is still mighty to save, and far surpasses in power all the neologies and new-fangled notions of the present time. But what will the heretic say, when he sees it is all over? "Ah," he will say, "that old truth urged on by the fanaticism of a foolish young man, did wake the people a little; but it lacked marrow and strength, and it all died away!" Will ye thus dishonour your Lord and Master, ye children of the heavenly king? I beseech you do not so but endeavour to receive again as a rich gift of the Spirit your first love. Are there some among you that are *professing* religion, and not *possessing* it? Oh, give up your profession, or else get the truth and sell it not. Go home, each of you, and cast yourselves on your faces before God, and ask him to search you, and try you, and know your ways, and see if there be any evil way in you, and pray that he may lead you in the way everlasting. And if hitherto you have only professed, but have not possessed, seek ye the Lord while he may be found, and call ye upon him while he is near. Ye are warned, each one of you; you are solemnly told to search yourselves and make short work of it. And if any of you be hypocrites, at God's great day, guilty as I may be in many respects, there is one thing I am clear of I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God. I do not believe that any people in the world shall be condemned more terribly than you shall if you perish; for of this thing I have not shunned to speak the great evil of making a profession without being sound at heart. No, I have even gone so near to personality, that I could not have gone further without mentioning your names. And rest assured, God's grace being with me, neither you nor myself shall be spared in the pulpit in any personal sin that I may observe in any one of you. But oh, do let us be sincere! May the Lord sooner split this church till only a tenth of you remain, than ever suffer you to be multiplied a hundred-fold unless you be multiplied with the living in Zion, and with the holy flock that the Lord himself hath ordained, and will keep unto the end. To-morrow morning, we shall meet together and pray, that we may have our first love restored; and I hope many of you will be found there to seek again the love which you have almost lost. "And as for you that never had that love at all, the Lord breathe it upon you now for the love of Jesus. Amen.

Verses 4-5

Love's Complaining

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent"

([Revelation 2:4-5](#)).

IT WAS the work of the priest to go into the holy place and to trim the seven-branched lamp of gold: see how our Great High Priest walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks: his work is not occasional, but constant. Wearing robes which are at once royal and priestly, he is seen lighting the holy lamps, pouring in the sacred oil, and removing impurities which would dim the light. As he is the most *careful* observer, so he is the most candid. He is ever "the faithful and true witness." He loves much, and therefore he never judges harshly. He loves much, and therefore he always judges jealously.

Jealousy is the sure attendant of such love as his. He will neither speak smooth words nor bitter words; but he will speak the truth the truth in love, the truth as he himself perceives it, and as he would have us perceive it. Well may he say, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches," since his sayings are so true, so just, so weighty. I therefore feel at this time that we may well join in a prayer to our Lord Jesus to come into our midst and put our light in order. Oh for a visit from himself such as he paid in vision to the seven churches of Asia! With him is the oil to feed the living flame, and he knows how to pour it in according to due measure; with him are those golden snuffers with which to remove every superfluity of naughtiness, that our lights may so shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven. Oh for his presence now, to search us and to sanctify us; to cause us to shine forth to his Father's praise! We would be judged of the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world. We would pray this morning, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." All things are naked and open to the eyes of him with whom we have to do; and we delight to have it so. We invite thee, O great High Priest, to come into this sanctuary, and look to this thy lamp this morning.

First, then, we notice that HE PERCEIVES. But this is our point at this time, that while Jesus can see all that is good, *yet in very faithfulness he sees all that is evil*. His love is not blind. He does not say, "As many as I love I commend;" but, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten." It is more necessary for us that we should make a discovery of our faults than of our virtues. So notice in this text that Christ perceiveth the flaw in his church, even in the midst of her earnest service.

The church at Ephesus was full of work. "I know thy works and thy labour, and for my name's sake thou hast laboured, and hast not fainted." It was such a laborious church that it pushed on and on with diligent perseverance, and never seemed to flag in its divine mission. Oh that we could say as much of all our churches! I have lived to see many brilliant projects lighted and left to die out in smoke. I have heard of schemes which were to illuminate the world; but not a spark remains. Holy perseverance is a great indispensable quality. In these three and thirty years we thank God he has enabled us to labour and not to faint. There has been a continuance of everything attempted, and no drawing back from anything. "This is the work, this is the labour," to hold out even to the end. Oh how I have dreaded lest we should have to give up any holy enterprise or cut short any gracious effort! Hitherto the Lord has helped us. With men and means, liberality and zeal, he has supplied us. In this case the angel of the church has been very little of an angel from heaven, but very much of a human angel; for in the weakness of my flesh and in the heaviness of my spirit have I pursued my calling; but I have pursued it. By the help of God I continue to this day, and this church with equal footsteps is at my side; for which the whole

praise is due to the Lord, who fainteth not, neither is weary. Having put my hand to the plough I have not looked back, but have steadily pressed forward, making straight furrows; but it has been by the grace of God alone.

But this church at Ephesus was not only laborious, it was patient in suffering great persecution. He says of it: "I know thy works and thy patience, and how thou hast borne, and hast patience, and hast not fainted." Persecution upon persecution visited the faithful, but they bore it all with holy courage and constancy, and continued still confessing their Lord. This was good, and the Lord highly approved it; but yet underneath it he saw the tokens of decline; they had left their first love. So there may seem to be all the patient endurance and dauntless courage that there should be, and yet as a fair apple may have a worm at its core, so may it be with the church when it looks best to the eye of friends.

So, next, *this evil was a very serious one*; it was love declining: "Thou hast left thy first love." "Is that serious?" saith one. It is the most serious ill of all; for the church is the bride of Christ, and for a bride to fail in love is to fail in all things. It is idle for the wife to say that she is obedient, and so forth: if love to her husband has evaporated, her wifely duty cannot be fulfilled, she has lost the very life and soul of the marriage state. So, my brethren, this is a most important matter, our love to Christ, because it touches the very heart of that communion with him which is the crown and essence of our spiritual life. As a church we must love Jesus, or else we have lost our reason for existence. A church has no reason for being a church when she has no love within her heart, or when that love grows cold.

Have I not often reminded you that almost any disease may be hopefully endured except disease of the heart? But when our sickness is a disease of the heart, it is full of danger; and it was so in this case; "Thou hast left thy first love." It is a disease of the heart, a central, fatal disease, unless the great Physician shall interpose to stay its progress, and to deliver us from it. Oh, in any man, in any woman, any child of God here, let alone in the church as a whole, if there be a leaving of the first love, it is a woeful thing! Lord have mercy upon us; Christ have mercy upon us: this should be our solemn litany at once. No peril can be greater than this. Lose love, lose all. Leave our first love, we have left strength, and peace, and joy, and holiness. I notice that Jesus *found it out with great pain*. I can hardly conceive a greater grief to him as the husband of his church than to look her in the face and say, "Thou hast left thy first love." What can she give him but love? Will she deny him this? A poor thing is the church of herself: her Lord married her when she was in beggary; and if she does not give him love, what has she to give him? If she begins to be unfaithful in heart to him, what is she worth? Why, any unloving wife is a foul fountain of discomfort and dishonour to her husband. O beloved, shall it be so with thee? Wilt thou grieve Emmanuel? Wilt thou wound thy Well-beloved? Church of God, wilt thou grieve him whose heart was pierced for thy redemption? Brother, sister, can you and I let Jesus find out that our love is departing, that we are ceasing to be zealous for his name? Can we wound him so? Is not this to crucify the Lord afresh? Might he not hold up his hands this morning with fresh blood upon them, and say, "These are the wounds which I received in the house of my friends. It was nothing that I died for them, but ill it is that, after having died for them, they have failed to give me their hearts?"

Jesus is not so sick of our sin as of our lukewarmness. It is a sad business to my heart; I hope it will be sad to all whom it concerns, that our Lord should be the first to spy out our declines in love. The Saviour pointed out the failure of love; and when he pointed it out *he called it by a lamentable name*. "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen." He calls it *a fall* to leave our first love. Brothers, sisters, this church had not been licentious, it had not gone aside to false doctrine, it had not become idle, it had not been cowardly in the hour of persecution; but this one sin summed up the whole she did not love Christ as she once loved him, and he calls this a fall. A fall indeed it is. "Oh, I thought," saith one, "that if a member of the church got drunk that was a fall." That is a grievous fall, but it is a fall if we become intoxicated with the world, and lose the freshness of our devotion to Jesus. It is a fall from a high estate of fellowship to the dust of worldliness.

"Thou art fallen." The word sounds very harshly in my ears no, not harshly, for his love speaks it in so pathetic a manner; but it thunders in my soul deep down. I cannot bear it. It is so sadly true. "Thou art fallen." "Remember from whence thou art fallen." Indeed, O Lord, we have fallen when we have left our first love for thee. So much for what our Lord perceives. Holy Spirit, bless it to us! The first word is *Remember*. "Thou hast left thy first love." Remember, then, what thy first love was, and compare thy present condition with it. At first nothing diverted thee from thy Lord. He was thy life, thy love, thy joy. Now thou lookest for recreation somewhere else, and other charms and other beauties win thy heart. Art thou not ashamed of this? Once thou wast never wearied with hearing of him and serving him. Never wert thou overdone with Christ and his gospel: many sermons, many prayer-meetings, many Bible readings, and yet none too many. Now sermons are long, and services are dull, and thou must have thy jaded appetite excited with novelties. How is this? Once thou wast never displeased with Jesus whatever he did with thee. If thou hadst been sick, or poor, or dying, thou wouldst still have loved and blessed his name for all things. He remembers this fondness, and regrets its departure.

He says to thee today, "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness." (Jer. 2:2) Thou wouldst have gone after thy Lord anywhere in those days: across the sea, or through the fire, thou wouldst have pursued him; nothing would have been too hot or too heavy for thee then. Is it so now? Remember! Remember from whence thou art fallen. Remember the vows, the tears, the communings, the happy raptures of those days; remember and compare with them thy present state. The next word of the prescription is "Repent." Repent as thou didst at first. The word so suitable to sinners is suitable to thee, for thou hast grievously sinned. Repent of the wrong thou hast done thy Lord by leaving thy first love of him. Couldst thou have lived a blissful life, only breathing his love, only existing for him, thou hadst done little enough; but to give up thy first love, how grievously hast thou wronged him! That love was well deserved, was it not? Why, then, hast thou left it? Is Jesus less fair than he was? Does he love thee less than he did? Has he been less kind and tender to thee than he used to be? Say, hast thou outgrown him? Canst thou do without him? Hast thou a hope of salvation apart from him? I charge thee, repent of this thine ill-doing towards one who has a greater claim upon thy love than ever he had. He ought to be today loved more than thou didst love him at thy very best! O my heart, is not all this most surely true? How ill art thou behaving! What an ingrate art thou! Repent! Repent! Repent! Repent!

To my mind, as I thought over this text, the call for repentance grew louder and louder, because of the occasion of its utterance. Here is the glorious Lord, coming to his church and speaking to her angel in tones of tender kindness. He condescends to visit his people in all his majesty and glory, intending nothing but to manifest himself in love to his own elect as he doth not to the world. And yet he is compelled even then to take to chiding, and to say, "I have this against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." Here is a love-visit clouded with upbraiding necessary upbraiding. What mischief sin has done! It is a dreadful thing that when Jesus comes to his own dear bride he should have to speak in grief, and not in joy. Must holy communion, which is the wine of heaven, be embittered with the tonic of earnest protest?

I see the upper springs of nearest fellowship, where the waters of life leap from their first source in the heart of God. Are not these streams most pure and precious? If a man drink thereof he liveth for ever. Shall it be that even at the fountain-head they shall be dashed with bitterness? Even when Christ communes personally with us must he say, "I have somewhat against thee?" Break, my heart, that it should be so! Well may we repent with a deep repentance when our choicest joys are flavoured with the bitter herbs of regret, that our best Beloved should have somewhat against us. We are to get back to these first works at once. Most men come to Christ with a leap; and I have observed that many who come back to him usually do so at a bound. The slow revival of one's love is almost an impossibility; as well expect the dead to rise by degrees. Love to Christ is often love at first sight: we see him, and are conquered by him. If we grow cold, the best thing we can do is to fasten our eyes on him till we cry, "My soul melted while my Beloved spake." (Song 5:6) It is a happy circumstance if I can cry, "Or ever I was aware, my soul made me like the chariots of Amminadib." (Song 6:12) How sweet for the Lord to put us back again at once into the old place, back again in a moment!

My prayer is that it may be so this morning with any declining one. May you so repent as not merely to feel the old feelings, but instantly to do the first works, and be once more as eager, as zealous, as generous, as prayerful, as you used to be! If we should again see you breaking the alabaster box, we should know that the old love had returned. May the good Master help us to do as well as ever, yea, much better than before!

So I have shown you how Christ prescribes, and I greatly need a few minutes for the last part, because I wish to dwell with solemn earnestness upon it. I have no desire to say a word by which I may prove myself a true brother pleading with you in deep sympathy, because in all the ill which I rebuke I mourn my own personal share. Bless us, O Spirit of the Lord! First, he *persuades with a warning*: "I will come unto thee;" "quickly" is not in the original: the Revised Version has left it out. Our Lord is generally very slow at the work of judgment: "I will come unto thee, and will remove thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent."

This he must do: he cannot allow his light to be apart from love, and if the first love be left, the church shall be left in darkness. The truth must always shine, but not always in the same place. The place must be made fit by love, or the light shall be removed. But the candlestick also symbolizes usefulness: it is that by which a church shines. The use of a church is to preserve the truth, wherewith to illuminate the neighbourhood, to illuminate the world. God can soon cut short our usefulness, and he will do so if we cut short our love. If the Lord be withdrawn, we can go on with our work as we used to do, but nothing will come of it: we can go on with Sunday-

schools, mission-stations, branch churches, and yet accomplish nothing. Brethren, we can go on with the Orphanage, the College, the Colportage, the Evangelistic Society, the Book Fund, and all else, and yet nothing will be effected if the arm of the Lord be not made bare. How can I persuade you, then, better than with the warning words of my Master? My beloved, I persuade you from my very soul not to encounter these dangers, not to run these terrible risks; for as you would not wish to see either the church or your own self left without the light of God, to pine in darkness, it is needful that you abide in Christ, and go on to love him more and more.

Note again, those who lose their first love wander far, they depart from God. "But," saith the Lord, "if you keep your first love you shall not wander, but you shall come into closer fellowship. I will bring you nearer to the center. I will bring you to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God." The inner ring is for those who grow in love; the center of all joy is only to be reached by much love. We know God as we love God. We enter into His paradise as we abide in His love. What joy is here! What a reward hath love! Heaven on earth is abounding love to Jesus. This is the first and last of true delight to love him who is the first and the last. To love Jesus is another name for paradise. Lord, let me know this by continual experience. "You are soaring aloft," cries one. Yes, I own it. Oh that I could allure you to a heavenward flight upon wings of love! There is bitterness in declining love: it is a very consumption of the soul, and makes us weak, and faint, and low. But true love is the antepast of glory. See the heights, the glittering heights, the glorious heights, the everlasting hills to which the Lord of life will conduct all those who are faithful to him through the power of His holy Spirit. See, O love, thine ultimate abode! I pray that what I have said may be blessed by the holy Spirit to the bringing of us all nearer to the Bridegroom of our souls. Amen.

PORTIONS OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON [Revelation 1:0](#) ; [Revelation 2:1-7](#) .