

## First Love (Part One)

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*Forerunner, "Bible Study,"*

### *Bible Study: First Love (Part One)*

By the time the apostle John recorded Jesus Christ's letter to the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7), more than sixty years had passed since the inception of the church of God. The sprawling city of Ephesus prospered as the commercial center of the ancient world and a focal point for pagan worship. The physically imposing Temple of Diana towered over the city's landscape, influencing and encouraging the evil practice of magic.

Amid this vital, bustling, and sinful metropolis, the Ephesian church was born. Despite its carnal surroundings, the nascent church endeavored to be doctrinally faithful to its divine Founder, striving to resist the influence of Satan and his false teachers (Revelation 2:1-3). However, in His letter to the Ephesians, Christ rebuked them, declaring, "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your *first love*" (Revelation 2:4; emphasis ours throughout).

What does Christ mean by "first love"? What motivates His admonition?

1. Does the Bible define "first love"? Revelation 2:4.

**Comment:** While Scripture does not explicitly define "first love," we can infer much from other statements in God's Word. The apostle John uses the Greek words *protos agape* in Revelation 2:4, which translates as the "foremost (first) love." In Matthew 22:36-38, Christ declares that the "*first and great commandment*" is, essentially, to love God unconditionally (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 6:5; 10:12). In effect, Jesus asserts that our unconditional love for God is our first and foremost responsibility, enabling us to love the law and each other (I John 4:7, 21; 5:2-3). As an example of this, upon receiving the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost following His ascension, the new recipients' first experience an enthusiastic love for God, along with unconditional love for one another (Acts 2:41-47; 4:31-35).

2. What happened to the Ephesian church's spiritual condition that made Christ's reprimand necessary? Acts 20:28-31.

**Comment:** Around AD 56, the apostle Paul prophesied that upon his departure, false teachers would infiltrate the Ephesian fellowship to lead them astray, and men from among the congregation would also rise up to corrupt the divinely established doctrinal truths (see also Ephesians 5:6-7). Although the Ephesians deserved praise for their dedication to Christ (Ephesians 1:15), Paul feared they would neglect their duty to love one another.

Soon after his exit, his dire prediction came true. Disputes arose, leading to division. Many drifted away, and the loving fellowship of earlier years began to wane (I Timothy 1:18-20; 4:1-3). Paul ordered Timothy to remain in Ephesus to combat these very problems (I Timothy 1:3-7), emphasizing that it was necessary to promote "love from a

pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,” from which many in the early church had strayed (Galatians 1:6-7).

**3.** Did other first-century churches struggle with their spiritual conditions? Hebrews 5:11-13; Galatians 4:9; Jude 3-4.

**Comment:** Declining spirituality was an all-too-common condition found in many of the churches of this period. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul reveals his concern that not enough emphasis was being placed on love and devotion, as they were “attempt[ing] to be justified by law” (Galatians 5:4). Recognizing their obsession with the letter of the law, Paul encourages them instead to fulfill the *spirit* of the law by showing love, gentleness, and empathy, while refusing to “grow weary while doing good” (Galatians 5:13-14; 6:1-2, 9-10).

Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church points out diminishing faith along with growing strife and division (I Corinthians 3:2-3; 11:18). The author of Hebrews also admonishes church members of that time that they are drifting away from and neglecting their salvation (Hebrews 2:1, 3). Along with His admonition to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2, Christ also warns the churches at Sardis and Laodicea about their dangerously faltering faith (Revelation 3:1, 15-17), for when our faith falters, our first love soon follows.

In Part Two, we will explore Christ’s prescription to the Ephesians to restore a healthy spiritual condition.