

**Great Verses of the Bible**  
**You Have Forsaken Your First Love, Rev. 2:4-6**  
**June 4, 2023**  
**Pastor John Mars**

This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I want to begin today by praising our staff. We here at Central are blessed to have the pastoral staff that we have here, blessed to have all of our staff, blessed to have all of our volunteers, that enabled Jeannine and I to get off for a week. And I have been asking people all morning to pray for me. I feel as if I still have a foot in northern Idaho!

Today we begin a new series of sermons that will take us all the way through the summer: Great Verses of the Bible. We probably will preach on your favorite, but the operative word there is “probably.” We begin today in the Book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 2, verses 4, 5 and 6. This is the risen Christ speaking to the church at Ephesus. He says: “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 Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” May God bless the reading of His Word.

Ah, the Book of Revelation! I was privileged to be at my last charge for 14 years, and I've always had at least one Bible study going. The 14 years I was there, I taught through the entire New Testament three times, and Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah, everything except the Book of Revelation. They begged me, they pleaded with me, and I resisted. I have one good reason, one selfish reason, and I now have a third reason why. The Book of Revelation is largely written in apocalyptic fashion. It is symbolic. And we have some of the symbols interpreted for us in the Book of Revelation. But largely we don't, and there's a lot of conjecture, and there is a lot of speculation. And there are as many interpretations of the book of Revelation as there are people who interpret the book of Revelation. And I would rather spend my time on that which I understand, than spend my time on that which I do not understand. Because it's not the things that I don't understand that bother me in the Scripture, it's the things that I do understand that bother me in the Scripture. That's the first reason. The second reason is, (this one is selfish, and this is rebellion on my part), there are people who almost make a religion out of Revelation. And people who think they have it figured out are very passionate about their opinion. I remember sitting in the IHOP in seminary. Now, this is poor seminary students in New Orleans, Louisiana. I was at the Baptist seminary there. We would go to the IHOP because they had all-you-could-eat salad and soup. And during finals week, we would go to the IHOP, and we were 25-26-year-old guys, and we could eat all night. So, we would eat and study, eat and study, eat and study. And there's two guys that came in. They were not from the seminary, and they were talking about the book of Revelation. One had one interpretation of the book, and the other one had another interpretation of the book, and they started arguing about who was right. And they got louder and louder and redder and redder and the maître d' finally had to ask them to leave. So, it's rebellion on my part, because of those who emphasize it too

much. But I have a third reason now: Pastor Aaron is teaching it right now, and I don't have to. So, thank you, Aaron!

So let me give a little background of this particular passage. In this particular passage, we have the symbols interpreted in the first chapter. The first part of the book of Revelation, the risen Christ appears to John the disciple, as he is exiled on the Isle of Patmos for preaching the gospel. The risen Christ reveals to him, speaks to him, and gives him messages for seven literal churches in Asia Minor. In the first part of the book, in chapter one, he talks about seven lampstands and seven stars. And he gives interpretation, kind of, of what those are. Now the lampstands, we know beyond any shadow of a doubt, the risen Christ says the lampstands stand for the seven churches. But the seven stars is a different matter. When the Bible was first translated from Greek to English, the translators translated the word the risen Christ uses into "angels," the seven angels of the churches. And, as a result, it has been translated that way ever since. The word, however, is "messenger" or "messengers." And the risen Christ says, "I'm sending this message to the messengers of the church." Now, my understanding of things is, if God wants to speak to an angel, God speaks to an angel directly, but ministers are a different story. A better translation is probably "the seven ministers" of these churches. It reminds me of a story. A little girl was watching her father, who was a minister. And every time he preached, he would bow his head for just a moment. She said, "Daddy, before you preach every time, you bow your head for a moment. What are you doing?" The father was very pleased that his daughter was so observant of his sermons. He said, "Well, darling, I pray that God will help me preach a good sermon." And she came back; she said, "Well, Daddy, why doesn't God answer your prayers?" You see, God speaks to angels directly, but ministers, kind of.

Some characteristics of the seven churches: Jesus makes no distinction between the churches, and we shouldn't either. He holds them all in His hand. There are lots of different flavors of us, aren't there? Aren't there, in this church? I love this Central Church because we are the church for "everybody else". We have Methodists, we have Baptists, we have Presbyterians, we have Episcopalians, we have Pentecostals, we have all kinds of flavors. It also says, in the first chapter, that Jesus walks among the lampstands. In other words, Jesus is active in all of the churches. He is working diligently in all of the churches. God's desire is to prosper the churches. And if the church prospers, it is because God prospers it. And if it does not prosper, it is because God does not prosper it. It is our job to create an environment that God can bless. If we do that, God will bless the church. And if we don't, God won't.

In our passage, the risen Christ is addressing the church at Ephesus. Ephesus, in that era, was known as the gem of Asia Minor. It was the most important trade city of Asia Minor. The church there was prosperous; it grew rapidly. The apostle Paul spent three years at Ephesus, longer than anywhere else in his ministry. The risen Christ begins by praising the church. He said, "I have seen your toil. You work hard, you are diligent, you work day and night, and you toil constantly." He praises their steadfast endurance; they are constant in season and out of season. He praises them because they stand up under persecution. He also praises them because they ferret out false prophets, and they recognize false doctrines. Paul had preached a message at Ephesus, where it is

Jesus, period, not Jesus, plus. Jesus was the end of the law; Jesus fulfilled the law. And it's Jesus, period, not Jesus, plus. But there were heretics that came in behind Paul that preached it was Jesus plus the law, Jesus plus Judaism, and in order to be truly saved, you had to become a Jew first. And Paul said, "No, no, no, no! It's Jesus, period, not Jesus, plus." But there's another group of heretics that moved in. This group of heretics said, "Well, since Jesus is the end of the law, that gives us a license to do whatever we want." And Paul said, "No, no, no, no!" These are the Nicolaitans. They turned their religious liberty into religious license. And the church at Ephesus ferreted all of these heresies out. But the risen Christ then says, "But I have something against you: You have forsaken your first love."

What is our first love? What is the first love? What is the number one characteristic of a Christian? What should be the number one characteristic of the Body of Christ? Jesus said, "By this will all people know you are my disciples, by the way you love one another." The church at Ephesus was hardworking, resilient. Their theology was impeccable, but they had lost their love. What happened? Their heresy-hunting had killed the love they had for one another, and for others. And, without love, a church is dead. Orthodoxy was achieved at the price of fellowship. They had exchanged right living for right belief. Orthodoxy can never take the place of love. They were hard working. They were resilient. Their theology was impeccable. They endured persecution. But they had lost their love: their love for one another, their love for their community, their love for their city. So, it is possible to believe all the right things and be completely wrong. But the risen Christ says it doesn't have to be that way. There's a solution, and He points it out very clearly. He says: Number one, you need to remember. You need to remember from where you have fallen. You need to remember your passion. You need to remember your love. You need to remember the warmth that you had for one another and for your community. And you need to remember love. Then you need to repent, not be satisfied with the way things are, not go, "Well that's just the age that we're living in."

Repent is an action. As I was actually out in my kayak on Lake Pend Oreille this week, God brought to my memory the story of the Prodigal Son. And there's a passage in that story that we often skip over, but I love. It says: "And when he came to his senses, when he remembered, he said, 'I will return to my father's house.'" Remember, repent, and act. Repentance may begin with, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner," but the proof of repentance is a changed life. The risen Christ says to the church at Ephesus, "Return to your first love. You don't have to stay the way you are." For the last three Sundays, you have heard messages about the Holy Spirit: how the Holy Spirit is our comforter, how the Holy Spirit is our enabler, how the Holy Spirit is our power source. The Holy Spirit enables us to do what we cannot do on our own, enables us to love the people that we cannot love on our own, enables us to return to our first love. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? This is four Sundays in a row you've heard that same message. It must be important! Now, what do we need to do? Well, individually, I cannot answer that question for you. The fact of the matter is, it's probably none of my business. That's between you and God. Have you lost, have you forsaken, have you abandoned your first love?

When I was writing this sermon, I wrote a phrase down and had to chuckle to myself, and I almost deleted it, and God wouldn't let me. Here's the phrase: How's your love life? How's your love life, from a Christian perspective? Do you love the way you once did? Do people know you as a disciple of Christ, by the way you love? Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will all people know you are my disciples, by the way you love one another." Can people tell you are a disciple of Christ by the way you love?

What about as a church? Do we have a passion for people? Do we have a passion for this community that we once had, or have we forsaken our first love? Does it break our hearts to see this phenomenal facility half empty every Sunday, even on our best Sundays? Does that break our heart? Do we remember that there was a time when this church, this facility, was filled to the brim with multiple services every Sunday and other days of the week? Does it break our hearts to see where we're at now? Are we better? Yes, we are. But we are a long way from where we need to be. And that's either "Amen!" or "Oh, me!" because that's the truth. Do we have a passion for everybody else? I will always cherish the day when I was rummaging through the archives, and I found one of the very first write-ups about this church. And it said: The government built two churches; they built one for the Catholic Church and they built one for everybody else. And that's Central. That's us. Do we have the passion that we used to have for everybody else? Does it break our hearts to see? It doesn't have to be this way. The risen Christ wrote to the church at Ephesus. He said, "Remember, repent, and act."

Let us pray. In the quietness of this time, I don't know if you have forsaken your first love. If you have, it doesn't have to be that way, the risen Christ says. Remember, repent, and act. Let's do that right now.

Now, as a church, I want to ask you: Do we have the passion we once did? If not, I would ask that you would unite with me in rekindling that passion, that love for one another, and that love for this community, that we might be the spiritual center for the Tri- Cities. Let us pray.

Lord, if we have indeed forsaken our first love, if we do not love one another and our community the way we should, Lord, break our hearts, turn us around. In Jesus' name, amen.