

“Return to Your First Love” (Acts 19:1-10; Rev 2:3-5)

We are taking the journey of “The Dynamic Love Story.” We’re looking at Acts and learning how the Word of God spread through the world, how the love of God was recognized at different parts of the world, how the reconciliation of God was realized in the world.

Today, we will look at the church in Ephesus. There the Word of God spread widely. The message of reconciliation grew in power, transcending social, cultural, ethnic and religious barriers. And disciples got new self-identity, Christians, “Christ-ones.” And they formed a community of Christ-ones, which we call a local church. And it was not the end. From that community, new communities were born and multiplied.

Acts 19:1-10

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ² and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³ So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. ⁴ Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. ⁷ There were about twelve men in all. ⁸ Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

1. The City of Ephesus

Ephesus was a commercial, political, and religious center for all of Asia Minor.¹

¹ *Life Application Study Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1996, p.1870

It was the capital and leading business center of the Roman province of Asia. A hub of sea and land transportation. It ranked with Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt as one of the great cities on the Mediterranean Sea.²

It is a typical cosmopolitan city. Diverse ethnic groups of people come and go, and not just goods, but also cultures, ideologies came from everywhere to this city, and were carried to everywhere from this city. The society consisted of a wide variety of people; the officials of the province of Asia (19:31), proconsuls (19:38), slaves, merchants, craftsmen, religious people, magicians.

There was a temple of the great goddess Artemis there. And it affected the whole province of Asia spiritually. The city's economy was largely supported by the temple too.

And it was also a center for black magic and other occult practices. The people cooked up magical formulas to give them wealth, happiness, and success in marriage. Superstition and spell were commonplace.³

There the Word of God resonated. People were shown their sins and repented and received water baptism. They stopped black magic, they left goddess Artemis and turned back to the true living God. The disciples received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the church was established!

Does this remind you of anything? Do you remember something like this? That's right! This is what Peter preached at Pentecost. It's how the first church in Jerusalem was started. Repentance, water baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit and added to the church. This is the pattern. And New Life churches teach those four in the Foundations class. It's a nine-lessons course, which provides you a strong solid foundation for your Christian life.

2. Paul's Strategy

The Word of God doesn't stop Ephesus. Ephesus became the foothold, the Word of God spread even more widely and grew in power. Luke recorded at Acts 19:10 "People throughout the province of Asia --both Jews and Greeks-- heard the Lord's message."

The church in Ephesus became the strategic center of Paul's ministries in Asia particularly (Acts 20:17-18, 25, 31). His ministries were not done just by

² Ibid., p.1742

³ Ibid., p.1743

himself alone. Actually many of his disciples carried the mission together. For example:

Cp.19 says, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem from Ephesus, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer.

And 20:1 says, "When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-bye and set out for Macedonia." And v.4, "He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia."

For the church in Colosse, Epaphras had taken a big role for teaching. And he also worked hard for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 1:7; 4:13).

In his letter to Colosse Paul mentioned the names of his fellow-workers such as Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Luke and Demas (4:7-14). And he also sent greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house (4:15). And he sent a personal word to Archippus, "Be sure to carry out the work the Lord gave you. (4:17)"

The Word of God spread widely and grew in power. Disciples were made and through them the message of reconciliation was realized. They continued to serve the ministry of God's reconciliation wherever they went. And they were connected with one another and churches were formed in many parts of Asia.

There were elders in each local church. Acts 14:23 says, "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church." And Paul gave the same job to the following generation. He said to Titus, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you (Titus 1:5)." This is what the early churches had been practicing. And we, New Life churches are following this pattern.

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, "He [Christ] gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12 NASB).

In Acts 6 we see one incident at Jerusalem church. They had a ministry of delivering food among them. Greek speaking Jews complained against those who spoke Hebrew, saying that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So Apostles proposed one idea that they themselves select

seven men and put them in charge of this particular work for service. They were like a managing team for one project. This is a wisdom for church. Apostles can concentrate on preaching and prayer.

Paul called elders from Ephesus and encouraged them and said, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

The Word of God spread widely and grew in power. When we look at Acts, this went well, so well. Disciples were made and churches were built and multiplied from town to town, city to city, transcending social, cultural, ethnic and religious barriers. It’s so great, amazing!

3. Warning

But it is said that that church in Ephesus does not exist anymore. It’s gone, disappeared.

Rev 2:1-5 (NKJ)

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ... I know ... you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary. ⁴ Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place— unless you repent.

At the beginning, the church in Ephesus was on fire. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. There were extraordinary miracles through Paul. A number of people involved in various occult practices came to the faith in Jesus. They confessed their secret practices and rituals. They repented, got saved, and started new life. The Word spread, and the message of the Lord overcame resistance and spread powerfully.

I have no doubt that more believers were added continually. The time passed, 10 years, 20 years, 30 years. When God revealed the Revelation to John, it’s around 95 AD, what was the church like? They lost their first love. They were

told to repent, return to the life-style that reflects their love for God and people, and to live out again the message of reconciliation.

Repentance is not one-time religious ritual. It's a new life style. It must be carried on.

4. Repentance

First of all, I will tell you about two things that are NOT repentance.

Repentance is not regret.

We regret over failure and mistakes. When things didn't go as we wanted, when we ended up being punished as a result of what we did, we would regret what we have done. However, regret is not repentance.

And Confession of sin itself is not repentance.

We admit that we have done wrong and express it with our mouth. That is confession of sin. But that itself is not repentance. Confession of sin can be a part of repentance, but it is not the essence of repentance.

Matthew 27:3-5

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Judas admitted what he had done was wrong and regretted it. Besides, he confessed his sin before people. Moreover, he tried to make up for his sin. However, in the end he hanged himself. He died in his sin.

Both regret and confession of sin can be a part of repentance, but NOT the essence of repentance.

So what is repentance?

Acts 26:20

First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Pay attention to the words, “repent and turn to God”.

I have been living according to the current of the world, my own desire, wish, preference, plan and viewpoint. But I stop this way of living, and turn to God, receive him as my Savior and Lord, that is repentance.

We can either turn back to God or continue our current way of life. Jesus is either Lord of all or He is not Lord at all. There is no other choice. If I say “I am gradually turning to God”, after all, I am continuing my old way of life.

Repentance is to replace the foundation of your life completely. You agree with God to delete your old foundation completely, whatever it was. And then you make Jesus the new foundation of your life. After that, whatever you do, you do it on this new foundation, Jesus.

Please don't misunderstand me; we will not become perfect the moment we repent.

By the cross of Jesus, the salvation has been completed. We don't need to do or add anything to be saved. We just receive it by faith. However, we don't instantly reach maturity of holiness the moment we are saved, the moment we are born again.

2 Cor 3:18

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

We have turned to God through repentance. And day by day we are being transformed into the image of Jesus from glory to glory by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every moment, we choose either to come closer to God or to go away from him, because there are only two directions. Every moment, we decide either to say “Yes” to Jesus or to something else.

Repentance means that we made a decision to turn to God, chose the direction to move toward God. You know he loves you so much, so you love him.

Then it's natural to be with him. Repentance means that I made a decision to say "Yes" to Jesus always because he is my Lord always. Why do I do that? I know he loves me so much and I love him. And only the power of the Holy Spirit can make you and me to do so. God promised to fill us with his Spirit (Acts 2:38). The Spirit is given through our faith (Gal 3:14).

But in reality, we sometime make a bad choice. We might lose our first love and don't notice it. Nicky Gumbel says, "When we are in a time of prosperity [and comfortableness and easiness, I add], we risk becoming independent or proud and may even start to trust ourselves more than God."⁴ While the church was in the trial, in persecution, they came to God, stayed close to God as their refuge, casted all anxiety in his hand and moved on just trusting God. Then the situation was turned around, things started to go well, the system was established, and it looked like everything worked well, then naturally we became independent, relying on our system rather than the Spirit, trusting ourselves more than God. And we don't recognize that we've lost our first love. So the warning to the church in Ephesus is not someone else's business, rather it's for us today.

5. Wearing the shoes of the Gospel of Peace

Eph 6:10-12

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Who is our enemy? The devil, Satan. He is the Deceiver. We must fight against the devil, his lie. We are not fighting against humans.

Our battle is spiritual battle, against the devil and evil spirits. On the surface, it may appear as human conflict. But in reality, the battle is against the forces and the authorities behind it. Our real enemy is Satan, the rulers of

⁴ Nicky Gumbel, *30 Days*, Alpha Publications, 1999, pp127-129

darkness and the power that controls the world, that moves the current of the time, the power of fear.

John MacArthur suggests these are nine ways that Satan attacks us: He tries to undermine God's character, make it hard for us to live the Christian life, confuse us with false doctrine, hinder our service, cause division, force us to trust in our own resources, make us play the hypocrite, cause us to become worldly, and make us disobey God.⁵

What shall we do then? What does the Word of God say? "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" (v.11).

Today I'll talk about only one armor, the shoes of the gospel of peace. For knowing full armor of God, please go to the church website, click Sermon, find "In Christ" Ephesians, look at the message "Be Ready." Please be ready.

As long as we are on this earth, we are in the spiritual warfare. We must put on the armor of God always.

What kind of shoes should we wear? The shoes of the gospel of peace.

God entrusted the gospel of reconciliation to us, church. We were sent to do the ministry of reconciliation. If we are not wearing the shoes of the gospel of peace, how can we go for reconciliation?

What kind of shoes are we wearing? If we are wearing the shoes of the gospel of peace, how can we blame other types of people and judge them? How can there be fights and accusations and hate among Christians, among churches?

People who have different viewpoints than ours are not our enemies. Those who are in different culture and tradition are not our enemies. Those who believe different doctrine, religion and philosophy are also not enemies. Even our persecutors are not our enemies. They are also loved by God. They are the people who are to be united with God and with us by the gospel of reconciliation.

God loves the world so much. God loves you with his amazing great love. God loves the people who don't know him. God loves the people you don't know. And God loves the people you don't like. God loves the world!

⁵ John MacArthur, *The Believer's Armor*, Word of Grace Communications, 1986

Do we live in the love of God daily? Are we remaining in His love? Do we live our lives, loving God? Is our love for God growing, or is it diminishing? Is our love for God becoming greater and deeper, or is it fading? Is our love for God becoming more alive, more active? Or is it withering gradually? Is the Dynamic Love story growing in you, through you?

“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23-24)

For Lifenet groups and personal reflection:

- 1) At the beginning, what the church in Ephesus was like? (Acts 19:1-20)
- 2) Read Rev 2:3-5. Remember your first love for Jesus, the season when you started to love Jesus. How was it like?
- 3) Look back on the last 12 months. Is your love for Jesus growing?
- 4) If Yes, how would you make it deeper? If No, what change do you need? What kind of help do you need?