

*The Covenant Pulpit*



**Revelation 2:1-7**

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Is there anything sadder than love that's lost its passion? Do you remember Barbara Streisand and Neil Diamond's Grammy Award winning mega hit?

You don't bring me flowers anymore  
You don't sing me love songs  
You hardly talk to me  
When you come through the door  
At the end of the day.

I remember when you couldn't wait to love me  
Used to hate to leave me...  
It used to be so natural  
To talk forever  
But "use to be's" don't count anymore  
They just lay on the floor  
Until we sweep them away.

And baby, remember  
All the things you taught me  
And I learned how to laugh  
And I learned how to love  
Even learned how to lie  
You'd think I could learn  
How to tell you goodbye  
'Cause you don't bring me flowers anymore.

The fastest growing divorce rate is among couples married more than 25 years. A survey in the *New England Journal of Medicine* revealed that 78% of married people are dissatisfied with the passion in their marriage. It's not just married couples who lose their passion. The March 2007 issue of *Marie Claire* magazine includes a trend report entitled: *Cohabitation Nation: Is living together a real test of marriage or a way to put it off?* in which Carrie Sloan journals about moving in with her boyfriend. Her final conclusion? As time wears on, reality sets in, romance wears off and life together turns into a rut. To Sloan, the biggest casualty of living together is the loss of passion.

And yet, like most of the MTV generation Carrie Sloan is not ready to get married. She would probably agree with a line from a blockbuster movie last summer: "Marriage is like a tense, unfunny version of 'Everybody Loves Raymond' only it doesn't last 22 minutes. It lasts forever."

When the passion is gone, can it be ignited again? That's the number one question I hear from discouraged couples. It's also a question I get from burned out Christians. Jesus answers, "Yes! It's not only possible, it is necessary." He is speaking to the ancient church at Ephesus. In Revelation 2:2&3 Christ compliments this local church by reciting a long list of its virtues. But there's coldness at its core. Delight has been replaced by duty. Church work has become a substitute for Christ worship. There's lots of involvement, but little intimacy. Doctrinal purity has become Dead Orthodoxy. Jesus could write his own song: "You don't bring me passion anymore." In verse four Christ says, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." This one fatal flaw cancels out a whole list of accomplishments. More than anything, God wants our passion. A principle that is essential for the Ephesians is just as necessary for Neapolitans:

### **Never waste passion on that which isn't critical.**

If vision tells us where we are going, passion is the fuel that gets us there. Passion is the fire in the belly of the soul. The military genius, Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch wrote, "The single most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul set on fire." But, if passion is the highest octane fuel in the world, it also comes in limited supply. Futurist Alvin Tofler writes that we live in an age of emotional collapse. A study in *The Journal of the American Mental Association* says that there is so much depression today because 1) contemporary life devours our passions with too many things, and 2) modern Americans don't know how to ration their emotional energy. More than ever we need to heed the warning of Thomas Adams: "Passion costs too much to bestow it on trifling things." Better yet, let's see what Jesus has to say about igniting the flame of passion for God and one another:

#### **1. *The pursuit of passion: Jesus passionately cares about our passion.***

When Jesus speaks of "*first love*" in verse four, he is using the language of romance. *First love* is that initial passion—the joy, ache, and obsession—that overwhelms us when we are first head-over-heels in love. But later, whether its marriage, friendship, or worship, neglect inevitably sets in and "*first love*" grows lukewarm and stale. It's hard to keep the fire, especially when we've grown too drowsy and content to get off the couch and stir the coals or throw a log on the fire. But there comes a moment in the dark night when you suddenly awaken to the chill and wonder, "What happened to the fire?"

The *first love* was Jesus' love for us. Passion comes from the Latin word *passus* which means "to suffer." Jesus said in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." There is a no more

greater passion than to suffer agony for the one you love. Later the Church called our Lord's crucifixion *The Passion of the Christ*.

This kind of passion demands a passionate response, and our Lord will not rest until he gets it. We get our English word *jealous* from the ancient Greek word *zēlos* which speaks of an intense burning or all consuming fire that burns for the one you love. Jesus is jealous for our love. I think of the Latin word *fervere* from which we get our English words *fever* or *fervent*. It means to boil or to be on fire. Hebrews 12:29 says, "For our God is a consuming fire..." He is, in the words of a great hymn, "Jesus, Lover of our Soul" who burns for us to burn for him.

Look at verses one and two: "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lamp stands. I know your deeds..." In the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation "the seven golden lamp stands" are a cluster of seven ancient churches near the coast of what is modern-day Turkey. Jesus walks among the churches. There is never a moment that he isn't in our midst. He's here in the house right now calling on us to grab hold of him with passion.

Verse two says that "he holds the seven stars in his right hand." Some scholars say that these are the angels who keep watch over each church. Other scholars say that these stars that they are the pastors of the seven churches. However you interpret this, the message is clear: Jesus cares deeply about his church. He opened his hand and gave the Ephesians the star of all the apostles, St. Paul to plant their church. He then gave them Paul's star disciple, Timothy to nurture them. Later another star of the Early Church, St. John moved to Ephesus and was part of the church. Mary, the mother of Jesus, spent her final years in that church in Ephesus. Three New Testament Epistles were written to that church and its pastor. As many as five other New Testament books, including the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation may have been written there. Early Church councils that set the future of Christianity were held in Ephesus. No church was ever more loved or blessed because Jesus was in its midst. Jesus passionately cares about the church in Ephesus, and he passionately cares about us.

Is there anything sadder than folks to give the best years of their lives to a marriage, a friendship, children, a cause, or a church, only to have the very people they've loved passionately ignore their efforts, or grow cold toward them, or walk out on walk out on them. Some of you here have experienced that heartache and betrayal, and you can understand what Jesus must feel as he stands before the church at Ephesus.

**2. The priority of passion: It's an issue of stewardship.** Verses 2&3 gives an impressive list of good things that the Ephesian Christians have done, yet there is that *one* thing in verse four: "You have forsaken your first love." Earlier we said that passion comes in limited supply. We have to be good stewards of our energy, not wasting it on lesser things. Those of us who have low-octane energy have to be especially careful because we start out with less in the tank. Others of us (and I'm one of these) have high-octane passion. Because we think that we have fuel to spare, we can fall into the trap of trying to fix every crisis, saying "yes" to every request, joining every cause, and trying to make everyone happy. But even high octane passion runs out, and it can be wasted on things that don't matter in the end. That's true for individuals, and it's true for churches. Jesus doesn't say that the things in verses 2&3 don't matter. But they aren't of *first* importance.

**Busyness can dissipate passion.** He says in verse two: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." These are busy Christians. They are doing good things for the Lord. Thanks God for Christians that are willing to serve. In almost every volunteer organization, including almost every church, 80 percent of the work and the giving is done by 20 percent of the people. How sad! Wouldn't it be great if we all did a little more so that a few could do a lot less? Jesus went to dinner at Mary and Martha's house. Martha slaved away in the kitchen to prepare a wonderful meal for Jesus, while her Mary sat at his feet. Finally Martha had a gutful and blew up at Jesus: "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?" Jesus replied, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only *one* thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better..." (Luke 10:40-42)

I learn several things from this story: 1) Busyness can dissipate passion. The more Martha worked for Jesus the less enthusiastic she became. 2) Working for Jesus can actually turn into bitterness. We become bitter at Mary who lets us wear ourselves out without giving a helping hand, and bitter at Jesus who doesn't do anything to change the situation. 3) Working for Jesus can make us self-righteous. Like Martha, we start judging the motives and character of those who aren't doing it our way or seeing it our way. 4) We keep plugging away, thinking that work of Jesus depends on our desperate efforts. Martha thinks that without her efforts everyone will go hungry. But if Martha would have left the kitchen to join Mary, don't you think don't you think that the One who miraculously fed the Five Thousand would have put a meal on the table? 5) In doing something for Jesus, we neglect what he wants most: our intimacy more than our involvement, and our worship more than our work. A husband may argue that he *does* love his

wife. After all he works hard, brings home a paycheck, and takes care of bills. But what she wants is for him to give her quality time, listen to her, and care about her heart. A wife may argue that she *does* love her husband. She works hard at making his life easier. But what he wants is her to make love to him. Martha says, "Jesus I love you. I'm proving it by working in the kitchen for you." But Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better thing." Ephesus is a *Martha* church. How sad to spend your passion trying to please Jesus with a meal only to discover, after all your efforts were spent, that he wanted something far different than you gave: he wanted you at his feet.

**Doctrinal purity can become Dead Orthodoxy.** Jesus goes on in verses 2&3, "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered..." Ephesus became famous as a bastion of Orthodox Christianity. When all the other churches began to slip into various heresies, the church at Ephesus persevered in the truth. More than 300 years later, when the Christianity was about to degenerate into a devastating heresy, the fathers of the Church gathered at the Council I of Ephesus in 432 AD. That meeting at Ephesus defined the doctrines of the apostles and left us a strong faith. No one ever persevered longer than the Ephesian Christians.

Verse three goes on, "...you have endured hardship for my name and have not grown weary." A couple of years ago a group of us visited the ruins at Ephesus. We stood in the ancient amphitheater where the floor of that stadium once ran red with martyrs' blood. We walked in the very tunnels where the Christians waited to be thrown to the lions and went where the lions were caged. In my imagination I could hear the roars of those ghost lions echoing down the corridors of time. Even as a tingle of terror run down my spine, I also felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude that they "endured hardship" and did grow weary. They *were* passionate about the truth. Jesus says in verse six, "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitians, which I also hate." Jesus is passionate about the truth, and he wants us to be too. But more than that, he wants us to be passionate about him. It matters little what kind of bread we've baked in the kitchen if he says in the end, "Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love..." St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1-4, about believing the right doctrines, doing the right stuff, and even being martyred for our faith, and then ends by saying, "...but if I have not love, I gain nothing."

**Perseverance can outlive passion.** In verse three Jesus says, "I know... your perseverance...you have not grown weary." More than three hundred years later that church was still persevering in their orthodoxy. But their

perseverance in their orthodoxy and Christian service outlived their passion for Christ: “You have forsaken your first love.” People can stay in a marriage long after the passion is gone. They can stay in a job until retirement, going through the motions. People spend years working in a church, but there is no life within them. Sometimes we keep going on because we don’t know what else to do. But duty without delight is so dreary. Don’t confuse longevity for reality or mistake work for passion. It’s important that we give our passion to that which our Lord wants most: quiet time alone with him; prayer; worship—all of those things that are part of sitting at his feet as Mary did. It’s there that we will get our energy and passion to fight for our faith, and serve others, persevere without growing weary, and even hate the Nicolaitans (whoever they are).

### **3. *The possession of passion: Fire comes when the ashes are stirred.***

Jesus is now going to tell us how to get back the passion—whether its in a marriage that’s grown cold, a cause that’s become a duty, a friendship that’s grown stale, or our walk with Jesus. In verse 5 he tells us that we have to do three things to stir the ashes:

**REMEMBER.** “Remember the height from which you have fallen.” In other words jog your memory. Spend some time thinking about what it used to be like when you first became a Christian. Remember how you excited you were, how you could hardly wait to tell others about your faith, and how you spent time in prayer and in your Bible. You came to worship services with anticipation and eagerness. Maybe you were raised in the Church and can’t remember a time when you didn’t know Jesus as your Savior. But you can remember a time when there was a season of spiritual passion that you haven’t experienced for a long time. Jesus says that we should meditate on what it was like back then. For all of you who have grown cold in your marriage or career (or whatever) apply this principle to those things. Remember how it used to be during those days of passion.

**REPENT.** Jesus says in verse five, that after you remember, “Repent...” Don’t just regret passion lost. Regret doesn’t change anything. Jesus says, “Repent!” Repentance recognizes that something is not only sad, it’s sinful. What is the first and greatest commandment of all? Deuteronomy 6:5 says it: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This is a command for a passionate relationship. This is at the heart of all stewardship. He is not only *one*; he is to be number one in all things. We give so much of our body, soul, heart, energy, time, and money to our own pleasure and impressing others (even in our church work) that we have little

left to give him. It should break our hearts. But repentance is more than just a broken heart; it is a commitment that things are going to be different.

**RETURN.** Jesus goes on in verse five to say, “Repent and do the things you did at first.” You start by remembering what it used to be like. You repent that it’s no longer that way. And then you return to doing the things you did in the passionate days of first love—whether its in your marriage, your job, or your personal relationship with Christ. Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Feel the way you used to feel.” The feelings won’t come back until we first do the right things. Fire comes back *after* we stir the coals. And sometimes we have to stir, and blow, and throw a lot of kindling on the ashes before they come back again. And most of the time, it will take the supernatural blowing of the Holy Spirit to rekindle the fire. Dearly beloved, we have to believe that fire can come from cold, even drenched-with-water ashes if only we will act on his promises and pray for his intervention.

**4. *The promise of passion: The pursuit is worth the passion.*** Jesus makes two promises: one negative, and one positive. He ends with a warning in verse five, “If you don’t repent, I will come and remove your lamp stand.” The church is to be a place of light in darkness and warmth in a cold world. Is there anything sadder than a church where the light has gone out and the gospel is no longer preached? Is there anything sadder than a church where the gospel is dutifully preached but fire of the Holy Spirit is no longer present? We have all attended the *First Church of the Open Refrigerator* where the frozen chosen huddle together. The church doors are open, but Jesus has left the house. He will only plead for so long. There comes a moment when a marriage is beyond redemption or God writes *Icabod* (the glory has departed) above a church. But there is also a great promise in verse seven: “...to him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life...” God will bring life where there is deadness and fire where there has been cold ashes. All we have to do is remember, repent, and do again what we’ve done before. Nothing ever has to stay the same.

Two images remain of ancient Ephesus. It now lies in ruins. The church where St. John’s grave is located has fallen in ruins around it. The small city of modern Ephesus is almost all Muslim. Jesus took his lamp stand away. But there is a growing handful of believers in Ephesus. The tree of life—the Cross of Jesus—has been lifted again. God *can* bring fire from the ashes.