

23 September, 1999  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church  
Mark James Toone

YOU'VE GOT MAIL:  
*OVERCOMING THE BLAHS*  
*Revelation 2:1-7*

Last week we had a glimpse of the glorious Jesus, didn't we? Did you feel as if you had met a Christ you did not know? We discovered something else. This book is not only Apocalyptic literature, it's not only prophecy, it is a letter. What's its name? (Revelation.) Who wrote it? (The Apostle John.) When was it written? (Around 95AD.) To whom was it written? (Seven churches in Asia Minor, now modern Turkey.) There have been clever interpretations about how each church might represent a stage in the history of the Christian Church. But you know what I think? I think they were letters! Written to seven churches. Perhaps as we have the audacity to read someone else's mail, we may discover a message for us.

Since these are letters, I thought it might be good for us to receive a weekly package over the coming weeks that speaks to us of our morning. Each parcel is a parable of the letter we will be studying for that day. Let's see what we have this morning. See if you can guess what this rose represents. (Retrieve white rose from mailbox. Read text.)

When I led my first group of Chapel Hill folks to the Holy Land, we also took a Greek Isles cruise. It was the cruise from hell. The rooms were dirty, the swimming pool was leading into the rooms, the drinking water was brown. Pretty yucky. But most of our folks said the same thing: seeing Ephesus was worth it. Ephesus is one of the most spectacular ruins I have ever seen. Only Petra is more impressive. It sits at the mouth of a river that feeds into the Aegean Sea. Today you have to drive seven miles from the sea to get to the ancient city. That's how much silt has flowed down to the mouth of the river and filled it in.

But at the time of this writing, Ephesus sat on the seacoast. It was the most important city in Asia Minor. All trade routes converged here. Even today, you can walk along the thirty-five foot marble and colonnaded pier to which ships tied as visitors and traders arrived in this important city. It had the third largest library in the ancient world, the façade of which is standing for you to view today. It had an outdoor theater that seated ...get this ...45,000 people. It is magnificent to sit in that place. It had three major temples to emperor worship. It even had an underground water and sewage system.

But its greatest claim to fame was the temple of Diana, considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was FOUR times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, covered with the work of great artists: 425 feet long, 220 feet high, 65 feet high. Its roof was born by 127 pillars, 36 of which were overlaid with gold and jewels. It was spectacular!

Ephesus is the only church of the seven that we know much about. Laodicea is the only other church mentioned in the New Testament. Prisca and Aquila may have brought the gospel to Ephesus. Paul lived in Ephesus for about two years. Timothy ministered there. Tradition says that Mary, the mother of Jesus lived here along with Luke. But it is John who is most closely associated with Ephesus. He lived here both before and after his exile on Patmos.

John addresses his words to the angel of the church in Ephesus. He starts each letter in this way. In Greek the word is "messenger." It may mean a guardian angel of the church, the pastor of the church or the prevailing spirit of the church. Each letter takes the same form. A salutation, a greeting, a praise, a warning and a promise.

Let's look at the praise. Jesus has some wonderful things to say to the Ephesian church. What are they? He tells them they are hard workers. They have labored faithfully and not grown weary. He commends them for their perseverance. Perhaps it wasn't easy being Christians in a city that was known for its beautiful temples to emperor worship and Diana worship. Perhaps they had experienced persecution of some sort. But twice they are commended for "hanging in there." They aren't quitters. That's good.

They are also spiritually astute. Jesus praises them for having the wisdom not to be duped by some men who were claiming to be apostles but who weren't. They had the spiritual insight to recognize phonies when they saw them. And then there are those Nicolaitans. We aren't sure what the Nicolaitans were doing. It probably was an immoral cult of some sort. But whatever it was, Jesus hated their practices and so did the Ephesian Christians.

Pretty good praise, wouldn't you agree? It sounds like they are hard working, persevering, orthodox Christians. What could be wrong with that? Just this. Verse 4: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." The word there means not that they lost it...but that they abandoned it. Misplaced it.

We were over at the beach this summer. Cooper loves "Bug's Life" and had a huge Hopper toy. One moment he had it. The next moment, he didn't. He set it down somewhere and no matter how hard we looked, we never did find it. That is the idea of this word. Somehow along the way, the Ephesian church just set down their love for Jesus. And they never picked it up again.

And that is what Jesus had against the Ephesian church. The Lord couldn't complain about their orthodoxy. He couldn't complain about their hard work. But he is heartbroken that they have traded the passion for him that once ignited their lives for a cold hearted, efficient, orthodox religiosity. They have the spiritual blahs...and it threatens their very ministry as a church.

(Get rose.) Ten years ago last July 22 I was standing in a back room of University Place Presbyterian Church feeling like I was going to vomit. My face was pasty, my mouth

was dry and my head was light. In twenty minutes, Cyndi was going to walk down the aisle and we were going to be married. I will never forget that moment. She looked so beautiful as she made her way down the aisle on her dad's arm. In her hands she held a bouquet of white roses...just like this one. When I saw her I could hardly breathe. I had written a song that I was going to sing to her as I looked at her. I couldn't even raise my eyes from the keyboard or I would never have got through the song. I was so desperately in love with that girl.

I still am. In fact, it hardly seems possible to me, but I love her more now than I did ten years ago. It is deeper, richer, more powerful even than my first love. But regretfully I know too many couples for which that is not true. Somehow they have misplaced that first love. They've allowed their relationship to slide and, suddenly, they discover that there is nothing there anymore. It is just ...Blah. Are you one such couple? You were passionate for each other when you got married. When you dated you could hardly keep your eyes off each other, your thoughts off each other, your hands off each other. Now, your relationship has settled into the dull monotony that you would never have dreamed possible.

The same thing happens to our faith in Jesus. Do you remember your first love for Christ? Do you remember when you first committed your life to him? The moment you walked down the aisle at that Billy Graham crusade? Or at the end of your church service? Or at the close of your youth group one night? Do you remember your hunger to read the Bible? To pray? Do you remember a time when you were eager to share your faith in Jesus...perhaps to the point of being a pest?

I remember those times in my own life. You believed with fervency. You prayed with conviction. Jesus just seemed so ...present...so real...so close and vibrant. What happened to that passion? How did we become so....blah? How did the Ephesian church become ...blah? That's what it is, isn't it? It's the spiritual blahs. Not that you don't believe. Not that you aren't still serving faithfully. Fulfilling your religious responsibility. It's just that the fire isn't there. The passion. The power. The vibrancy of that first love. It is gone.

Have you ever been there? Are you there right now? How do we fight the blahs? How do we overcome the spiritual blahs? There are some clues in our text. First, **Remember**. Notice verse 5: "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" It sounds like a threat, doesn't it? But it is sound advice. If we want to regain the passion in our spiritual lives, we have to remember where we once were.

The Bible is full of "remembers." The Old Testament is one big "remember." We are constantly being urged to bring back to mind the spiritual mileposts of our lives. When was the last time you did a spiritual inventory of your own life? One time during a spiritual retreat, I actually made a chart of my life, indicating those moments when God's presence was particularly strong in my life. That process where I said to myself, "Oh, and remember your experience on the Anna Jackman mission boat in Alaska? And remember when the moon looked like a cross through your window that one night? And

remember when you sat for hours in your youth group praying and singing? And remember when you led your first person to Christ, Virginia?"

This morning we received new members. We asked them to do what we ask every class of Inquirers' to do. To write down their spiritual journey. Why? Because the process of remembering God's faithfulness in your past often drives you to seek something more in the present. Do you remember a time when your spiritual life was richer? When your love of Jesus was stronger? That's a good start if you want to overcome the blahs.

Second, **Repent**. Same verse: "Repent and do the things you did at first." That is such good advice for recovering misplaced love. First, Repent. The word means, "turn around. Go the other way." If you really want to regain your spiritual first love, you have to stop doing things the way you have been doing them, turn around, and do the things you once did.

I don't do much marriage counseling any more. But when folks come in complaining that they don't "feel" in love anymore, I ask them to ACT as if they are in love. To do the things they did when they were in love. Do you remember those days? Ladies, do you remember how you scooted over next to your beloved while he was driving the car? (Of course with bucket seats and consoles in between, it can be a challenge. But that never stopped us.) Do you remember how you held hands and walked ...sometimes for hours. Do you remember how you could talk late into the night and be amazed at how the time had passed. Do you remember how you sent notes and made special dates and called each other for no good reason? Start doing those things again. If you want to overcome the blahs, if you want to regain misplaced love, you start acting as if you are in love.

It is no different with your relationship with Jesus. Start doing the things you once did when you were so excited about your newfound faith in Jesus. Start thinking about him again. Start talking to him again. Start reading his word again. Start telling others about him again. The way to discover misplaced love for your Lord is to ACT as you did when you were enjoying the blush of first love.

But I don't want to let this become just a conversation with us as individuals. Remember, this is a letter to a church. An entire body of people. And what a sobering warning it is! Here was the church that had enjoyed the very presence of Paul for two years...longer than he stayed at any other church. Luke lived there. Prisca and Aquila. Timothy. The mother of Jesus. John himself. If any church had a legacy worthy of preserving, it was Ephesus. And yet even they had reached a point, somehow, in a short fifty-year period, where their fire for Jesus Christ had been replaced by an efficient but coldhearted orthodoxy! God save us from such a fate!

As I travel this country, I regret to say that I find all kinds of Presbyterian churches of that description. Their doctrine is fine. They are all working pretty hard. They are faithful folks. But they have no passion. No fire. They have forgotten what it means to be in love.

There's another R. **Remove.** Finish the verse: "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." That is a frightening prospect, isn't it? Jesus seems to be saying, "If you do not rediscover the most important thing...which is not perfect theology, not organizational busy work ...if you do not rediscover the most important thing which is a passionate love for me, then I will take away your light. Lights are for attracting attention. Lights are for illumination. But if you call yourself my children but do not love me, I don't want to attract more people to you. I don't want a lot of attention drawn to you. Because anyone who discovers you won't discover the real thing. They will just discover a lot of theologically accurate, hard working souls whose fire burned out a long time ago."

Do you still have your first love for Jesus? Is it time for you to remember the height from which you have fallen? To repent of your blasé' approach to the glorious Jesus and do the things you once did? May the risen, glorious Christ inspire us to new passion for him.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS  
*"OVERCOMING THE BLAHS"*  
*Revelation 2:1-7*

*September 23, 1999*  
*Pastor Mark Toone*

- Think back to the vision of the Son of Man in chapter 1. Now notice how Jesus is introduced in 2.1. What claims are being made for him in describing him as the one who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands? (Hint...remember what the lampstands represent.)
- Summarize the words of praise that Jesus offers the Ephesian church. Now, what is his complaint about them? How can folks be guilty of that when they are doing such laudable work?
- Think back to your first experience with Jesus...your first love. Describe it. Why do you think it was so powerful? Name one way in which you have "misplaced" your own love for Christ.
- Now, if you were to "repent and do the things you did at first," name one of those. What one thing could you begin to do again that would reenergize your love for Jesus?
- Pray for yourself, your group and our church, that God might give us a deeper and more genuine love for Jesus Christ than we have ever known.