

“Our Ultimate Priority”

Penetrating a Dark World

Revelation 2:1-7

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Don: The Lord be with you.

Men: And also with you.

Don: Let us pray. Our Father and our God, we thank You that You have seen fit to give us another day. We thank You that Your mercies are new every morning, and that indeed great is Your faithfulness. Father, We thank You that You are God along with the Son and the Holy Spirit, and there is no other. And we thank You, Father, for creation, for Your sustenance, and most importantly for the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. And we pray this morning, Father, that You would instruct us in Your word, for we ask it in the name of Christ. Amen.

Men: Amen.

Don: Well I'm humbled to be up here, Bruce asking me last week to teach today and next week. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul says to his readers and hearers to imitate him as he imitates Christ. And certainly Bruce is a model for that, and I can only very dimly do that. It reminds me of the old Dan Fogelburg song in the 80s, the song he sang about his father. He says, "My life is but a poor attempt to imitate the man." And I can only very poorly imitate Bruce with his abilities, with his discipline, with all of the rich illustrations of his life. And we are obviously praying for him and we will certainly continue to pray for him and everything with this new trial that he is going through.

Anyway, we're here. And as Sig said, we're going to be talking about a little mini-series that I've entitled "Ultimate Priorities." And this may be a continuing series from time to time. And so today I'm going to be talking about love, really our first love, and then next week worship.

So I'm going to be reading from Revelation 2, verses 1-7 this morning. Now if you're here and you're thinking, "Oh, Revelation!", you may be thinking, "Oh, now I'm going to learn about the significance of the mark of the beast, or who the antichrist was or is." Well if you've come to learn that, I'm afraid you're going to be severely disappointed. *(Laughter)* We're going to read Christ's words to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7, and I'll be reading from the New King James Version.

"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars. And you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake, and have not become weary.'

"Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen. Repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamp stand from its place, unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.'

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“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” This is the word of the Lord.

Men: Thanks be to God.

Don: Amen and Amen. The apostle John was on the isle of Patmos. The rest of the apostles were martyred, but John was exiled by the emperor Nero. But while that was taking place he saw the risen and reigning Christ on the isle of Patmos.

Now there are different opinions as to when the book of Revelation was written. The majority believe that it was written probably around 90 A.D. near the end of John’s life. But there is a minority, mainly preterists, those who believe that most of the book of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century, except for the last few chapters. And they believe it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, in the late 60s. So anyway,--

Participant: What are their names? You referred to them as preterists?

Don: Yes. They believe that most of what is written in the book of Revelation from chapters 4-18 has been fulfilled, and that all we are waiting for now is the Second Coming.

Be that as it may,. Revelation was written to the seven churches in Asia Minor. And our passage was written to the church at Ephesus, which is modern-day Turkey.

Paul spent at least two years there. In Acts 19 and 20 there are some interesting occurrences. For example, we have the record of the first person who fell asleep during a sermon and fell and died—Eutychus. And then a riot took place whenever people were turning in all of their articles of sorcery and everything like that. People and the craftsmen for Artemas or Diana, depending on what your translation is, were no longer making money. And people were shouting, “Great is Artemas,” or “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” Ted still says that, right, Ted? Great is Diana, your wife!

Ted: That’s right, Don. It’s always the same. I say that every morning. *(Laughter)*

Don: All right. And then, of course, in Acts chapter 20, Paul has his famous address to the Ephesian elders. And of course we know that Paul wrote one of his most well-known epistles to this church, which is a kind of a mini-systematic theology, the book of Romans being his major work.

So Jesus addresses this church and six other churches. Now why these seven specifically? It’s hard to say. We really don’t know. It could have been that they were very prominent churches at that time.

So Christ has patterns of addresses here. He identifies Himself first of all with certain characteristics. He says that He is the One who *“holds the seven golden lamp stands and the seven stars”* in His right hand. Or other times He’ll say that He’s the One with the double-edged sword, the amen and the Great Witness, etc. And then He gives encouragements, rebukes, or both. Sardis and Laodicea are only given rebukes. Smyrna and Philadelphia (not the city of brotherly shove, but the city of the first century) *(laughter)*, are only given encouragements. And it’s very interesting to me that these churches are small and poor and suffering great persecution. And then Ephesus, Pergamum or Pergamos, depending on your translation, and Thyatira are given both encouragements and rebukes.

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Jesus addresses the angel of the church of Ephesus in verse 1. Now when we think of angels, we usually think of these winged creatures like Gabriel or Michael, who continually praise God and do His bidding. In their work of consolation, we know that they console Jesus many times, or announcement and proclamation, such as at the birth of Christ or announcing the Resurrection to the women at the tomb, or judgment, when they destroyed hundreds of thousands in Assyria, for example. It was a scary kind of thing to encounter an angel. The shepherds, for example, were terrified when they saw them.

But commentators see this word *angel* as being translated *messenger*. And so this is not addressed to an angel, but to a messenger. And many commentators see it addressed to the pastor of this church in Ephesus and to the pastors of these seven churches.

Notice Christ’s identity. He says, *“These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands.”* And the seven stars are synonymous with the seven angels, meaning the pastors of these seven churches, and the seven golden lamp stands are the seven churches. Sig, would you read Revelation 1 verse 20 on the handout, please?

Sig: *“The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lamp stands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands which you saw are the seven churches.”*

Don: Okay, thank you. So the seven stars or the seven angels are pastors, and the seven lamp stands are the churches.

Now Jesus says that He holds these seven pastors and the seven churches in His right hand, the hand of power and authority. Obviously, we don’t believe that God has hands. Jesus in His humanity does. We know that in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed we say that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. That means the seat of power and authority. And so that means that Jesus holds these churches in His powerful hand.

Now the number *seven* can also symbolize completeness and perfection in Scripture. God creates the world in six days, and then on the seventh day He rests and His work is complete. And so people have seen this not just as an address to the seven churches, but to the church of all ages, all churches.

Christ walks in the midst of the church. It’s wonderful to know that Christ is taking care of us, not only as individuals but our churches as well—loving us, nourishing us, encouraging us, rebuking and disciplining us, if necessary. He does so with the light of the gospel.

Now we come to Christ’s words of encouragement in verses 2 and 3. *“I know your works, your labor; your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil.”* This apparently was a very active church in the service of the Lord. Apparently, the people paid very great attention to Paul’s address before he left.

Christ knew these things, and we’ve talked about this word *know* in other contexts. It’s not just that He knew their works in the sense of being aware of them. He’s aware of everything, good or bad. But He knew them with great affection and delight and approval.

“I know your patience.” You know, we have to remember that it was not easy to be a church of Jesus Christ in the first century. It’s not like they had a Constitution and

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freedom of religion. Being a Christian at that time was a virtual death sentence. Read Acts and the Epistles. We use the word *witness* when we talk about sharing the gospel with someone. But in fact the word *witness* and the word *martyr*, *marturaea*, are the same words in the Greek. And so that’s very interesting.

It was very hard to get an education or a job because it would mean submitting to the paganism all around them—worshiping false gods, sacrificing to idols. If you didn’t do that, you weren’t really able to function. But these people were patient day in and day out.

How many of us can say that? We’d never say this, but sometimes we probably think it. Lord, give me patience and give it to me right now. (*Laughter*) But these people were patient, and Christ commends them for this.

He says, “*You cannot bear those who are evil.*” Apparently they practiced church discipline, which Bruce and John Calvin before him said is one of the three keys of the church along with preaching and the Lord’s Supper and Baptism.

“*You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.*” Apparently this congregation, not even having the Scripture that we have, was able to discern and detect false teachers, unlike many people in our day.

You know, there is one prominent evangelical pastor, for example, who has the phrase “deeds, not creeds.” Now I think I may understand what he means. Dead orthodoxy without evidence to back it up is not good. But that can be taken in a very wrong way too. And a lot of people think “deeds, not creeds” means that we don’t need to be concerned about doctrine. Doctrine divides. Well, creeds affect your deeds. What you believe is going to affect how you live. And how many times has Bruce said to us that doctrine precedes practice?

For example, there are many people, such as a man I’m thinking of who is a very charismatic leader and speaker. But he denies the doctrine of the Trinity. But that doesn’t matter to some people because they say, “But he loves Jesus and he really motivates me. He’s really energetic and I really like to hear him.” Well, if you don’t have the right beliefs about Jesus, then you can’t really know the true Jesus and love the true Jesus, can you? So Jesus commends them for this: that they are able to discern false teachers and those who claimed to be apostles but weren’t.

Jesus said that they persevered and they had patience and had labored for His name’s sake, and had not grown weary. You know, the perseverance of the saints wasn’t just a doctrine that they could add to their theological collection, but it was a reality to the Ephesians. They were in it for the long haul, day in and day out, not growing weary of their persecution.

Now how many of us can say that? I know that if I have a headache or a toothache or when I’m tired it’s hard for me to pray properly.

Think of Athanasius in church history, the champion of orthodoxy as far as the Deity of Christ and the Trinity are concerned. When there were bishops who were Arians, believing that Jesus was just a created being were in power, he was exiled from his post. Then when bishops got in who believed the truth, then he was reinstated, then

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excommunicated again and reinstated. How long can you put up with that? But Athanasius was patient.

Or take John Calvin, who was exiled from Geneva, only to be asked to come back. He wouldn't do it at first, but he did. And he had to put up with a lot of stuff.

Patience! What if you were in a situation where, God forbid, we would be taken over by an Islamic regime, and you were told to convert to Islam or die, etc.? Could you do it? Only by the grace of God, but it would be very, very hard. So Christ commends them for their perseverance and their patience.

Now Jesus didn't have to encourage them, did He? After all, He says in Luke 17 that when you've done everything you're called to do—and we haven't!—but He says that when you've done everything that you're called to do, you're to say, *“We are unprofitable servants. We have only done our duty.”* But in His great love and His great compassion He does encourage them. And He has saved this word of God throughout the centuries so that we may be encouraged.

Do you ever get discouraged in your work for the Lord, whatever it might be? Well, I've talked to that person and prayed for that person for years and he still hasn't come to Christ. Or, boy, I do so much work for the church and I hardly get any thanks, or anything like that. Well, take heart! If you grow weary, wondering whether your work for the Lord is worth it, take these Scriptures to heart.

I haven't written them down. But Christ promises graciously to reward us. He said that even a cup of cold water will receive its reward. Hebrews 6:10 says this. *“God is not unjust to forget your labor of love.”* And Paul, at the end of 1 Corinthians 15, in verse 58, says to *“Abound in the work of the Lord, because you know that your work in the Lord is not in vain.”* Those are great words of encouragement from our Lord.

Now I'm going to depart from the Holy Spirit inspired order and go to verse 6, where Jesus completes His encouragement. After rebuking them He commends the Ephesians by saying this, that at least you have this in your favor: *“that you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”*

Now who were these Nicolaitans? We don't know a whole lot about them. But I was surprised to learn that it is possible that they come from and were disciples of Nicolas of Antioch, one of the first deacons mentioned in Acts chapter 6. Early church tradition says that he was a convert to both Judaism and Christianity, and that he or one of his predecessors may have attempted to mix elements of paganism and Christianity together, which was a big problem in the church for centuries, and even today with a lot of churches which want to be more like the culture and the world than the church. Mike Davis, would you read Revelation 2, verses 14-15 on the handout?

Mike: *“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin, so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”*

Don: So these people, just like Balaam and Balak who wreaked havoc with the children of Israel, these people were doing the same thing in the first century church at

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Pergamos or Pergamum. They were classic antinomians, right? Well, God has forgiven me, and therefore I can live any old way I want.

Participant: Don, what’s an antinomian?

Don: The word means *against law*. It’s a person who believes that the law of God is passé—not just the ceremonial law, but the moral law as well. Since Christ has forgiven us and we’re not saved by anything that we do but only by His grace, then it doesn’t matter how we live.

Participant: You mean the Ten commandments?

Don: Yes.

Participant: Okay, thanks.

Don: All right. So Christ says that He hates the deeds of the Nicolaitans. I think that’s important for us to remember, lest we fall into the same kind of thinking. Well, it doesn’t really matter. How many of us have thought this many, many times? O Lord, I can get away with this one sin, right? It doesn’t really matter. You know, Christ has and always will hate sin. Thank God He loves us, but He hates our sin. And I’m not going to go into it now. I’ll skip it.

Participant: You have to get into it.

Don: All right. As far as the unbeliever is concerned, I think you can make a case from Scripture that because God is at enmity with the unbeliever, He not only hates their sin, but there are passages which say that He hates them as well. *“Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated.”* I don’t want to get too much into that right now. I think there is a sense in which God hates our sins, the sins of Christians, more than even the sins of unbelievers because it grieves Him, because He has bought us.

You parents can relate to that, right? When your kids do something that you don’t like, it disappoints you greatly, whereas you really couldn’t care less about others in that regard. Anyway, I’d better quit while I’m ahead.

Now what if Christ were to say this about our churches? Wouldn’t that be something? We might be tempted to be proud. Nevertheless, wouldn’t it be wonderful to hear that kind of commendation from Jesus about our churches? Hopefully, at the end of our journey, we will hear *“Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your lord.”*

Participant: Don?

Don: Yes?

Participant: Since you brought up the term *antinomianism*, I think that’s an irrelevant term to a mature believer.

Don: Okay. Well, it should be.

Participant: What is the law? The law is good and the law is perfect. There’s nothing wrong with the law.

Don: Yep.

Participant: Are we good and perfect?

Don: No way, except in Christ.

Participant: So that’s an irrelevant term to a mature believer. He knows the law is good. He knows the law is perfect. But he knows he’s not. That’s the problem.

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Don: Well, exactly.

Second Participant: Don, can I come to your rescue?

Don: Thank you.

Participant: I think Bill is correct. The fact of the matter is that every good work we do comes from Christ. But having said that, we all get sloppy and we begin to think that God (*unclear*) is not looking at our sloppiness. And it's good to be provoked on that point.

Don: Well it is.

Participant: A continual diet of that teaching about the law would be contrary to the teaching, but—

Don: Indeed.

Participant: I don't mind being provoked.

Don: Right.

Participant: And I think of something you said. It would be great if Christ gave this commendation to our churches. It would be great, for instance, in my little church if Christ came and gave a rebuke to our congregation. I would like to know what Christ finds unfavorable in our congregation.

Don: Well, sure. And I'll be getting into that right now, or at least if no one has any more comments or questions. But legalism and antinomianism have been the two heresies that have plagued the church for centuries. And so both need to be put in their proper place and avoided.

Anyway, let's go on to the rebuke, since Ted spoke of the rebuke. Obviously all is not well, and Christ talks about it here in verse 4. *“Nevertheless I have this against you: that you have left your first love.”*

Now I believe that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant word of the living God. But you know, sometimes I have to confess that I wish that there were more details given, and here is one of these places. Christ doesn't go into detail about this, does He? How had they done this? How had the Ephesians done this? What was the nature of their backsliding? How had they left their first love, not just as individuals but as a congregation? Were they becoming maybe a little lax in their zeal? Were they just going through the motions and becoming mechanical in their worship? Were they not loving one another as fervently as they had at first? We just don't know. But whatever the case, Christ is not pleased with their status at this point.

Participant: Hey, Don?

Don: Yes?

Participant: Is there anything to learn from Paul's letter to the Ephesians that helps us understand what might have been going on in their church? Were they even written closely, Paul's letter compared to John's in Revelation?

Don: I don't know. It depends on when it was written. If it was written in 90, no way.

Participant: A generation apart.

Don: Even if it was written near 70, that would be about fifteen years apart, or maybe even longer than that. I know that Paul in his address to the Ephesians talks about savage wolves that would invade the church. Apparently Christ commends them for recognizing

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that. He also talks about not ceasing to teach the whole counsel of God. So Sig, I don't know if that would give a clue or not. Sorry about that.

But anyway—and I said this when I preached this message last summer at my church and at a church a month ago—I think that we who belong to churches that take the gospel seriously, and we as committed believers—I mean I can't read the heart of anybody, but how could you not be a committed believer and get up at 5:00 in the morning to come here at 6:30? But we need to pay special attention to this admonition.

I doubt if many of us would be tempted to liberalism, denying the essentials of the faith. There are some churches, unfortunately, which don't practice church discipline very well, but there are many that do. I think that our occupational hazard is this admonition—leaving our first love. Ted, would you read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3?

Ted: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I have nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”*

Don: Okay. Imagine doing all of those things—even being a martyr, giving your body to be burned, supposedly for the sake of Christ. We know that people do it for the sake of Allah all the time, right?—suicide bombing and so forth—but to do all of those things and not to have love. What does Bruce say to us so much? Knowledge must lead to learning. Learning must lead to living. And living must lead to loving.

You know, I will be the first to admit and confess that I love to get into theological discussions, even arguments. But how much more should I long to spend time with Christ in the prayer closet meditating upon His word! As goes the individual, so goes the church over time.

The late Stewart Sax, who was one of the pastors at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, has a great illustration about his experience of family prayer at the dinner table with his kids to bring this to light. Stewart was praying, and at the end of his prayer he said, “In Jesus' wonderful name. Amen.”

I'm going to just choose names here for these kids. Jimmy, the oldest, on another occasion prayed, “In Jesus wonderful name. Amen.” And of course the parents were thrilled. They thought this was just great. But then, the next time when Stuart prayed, he only said, “In Jesus' name.” And then Jimmy blurted out, “Dad, you didn't say ‘wonderful.’”

And then another time, in the middle of the prayer, Jimmy yelled, “Mom and Dad, David's not praying!”

And then there was little Bobby, the youngest, who knew that when the word Amen was said that the prayer was over. And so all during the prayer he went, “Amen. Amen. Amen.” *(Laughter)*

Now that's amusing because it's an illustration of children. And maybe even some of you as parents have gone through that. But we're just more sophisticated as adults, right? A lot of times we're more concerned about what others are doing than what we're

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supposed to be doing. Or a lot of times we just go through the motions just to get it over with, right?

My mind wonders during my prayer time or my reading of the Word, both in private and in corporate worship. Oh, this sermon’s so long! I have somewhere to go. You know, I have to do work outside when I get home, or I have a sporting event to watch or attend, or something like that. A lot of times we’re like the people of Nehemiah’s day. Oh, I can’t wait for the Sabbath to be over so I can resume my business.

Brothers, in teaching you I teach myself as well. If you’re cold or mechanical in your worship, or in your relationship to fellow believers, or more interested in theology as the end than as the means to the end, if you’re more interested in theology than the God behind theology, then you may have lost your first love as individuals, families or as a church.

A friend of mine and I were talking on the way to session meeting last night about that, about how we can look back a lot of times. Oh, my goodness, we couldn’t wait to study the Word! We couldn’t wait to share our faith. Then over time, as perhaps in some marriages, the fire just decreases and the embers die.

I think that one of God’s most neglected attributes is the attribute of *jealousy*. Bill, would you read Exodus 20, verses 5-6, and Exodus 34:14?

Bill: *“For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love me and keep My commandments.” “And you shall worship no other gods. For the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”*

Don: Thank you. We love to hear or talk about the love of God. Even unbelievers like that. And then some of us who have benefited from R. C. Sproul or others like to talk about the holiness of God, or his grace, his justice, etc. But as a rule we don’t spend a lot of time thinking or talking about His jealousy. And there is probably a reason for that. It’s probably because we observe it in people. We observe that trait in people and in ourselves and know that this is very sinful, but not in God’s case.

If I can give a human analogy—and human analogies always break down—it’s jealousy of a husband for his wife, or vice versa. How would you guys feel if you came home one day and your wife said, “You know, there’s this man I met at work or at the store,” or whatever. “And I really like him. I’m going to start going out with him.”

Would you say, “Okay, honey. Whatever makes you happy. That’s fine.” No, I think you’d be very upset, and rightly so.

Participant: You’d say, ‘Bring me the gun.’ *(Laughter)*

Don: Yeah, right. And that’s the sinful aspect of our jealousy, right? But you would be very upset. “Look, I am your husband. Your love is to be exclusively to me.”

And that’s the kind of jealousy that God has, although it’s certainly perfect and sinless jealousy. It’s for His glory and our good. Does God need us? No, of course not. It shows His incomparable love for us as His bride. And I know that it’s hard for us as men to relate to. But the closeness that we have to Christ is compared to that in Scripture between a bride and groom, a husband and wife. In the Old Testament idolatry is compared to adultery time and time again. God takes these things very seriously. He is

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jealous for our devotion. And it’s for His glory and for our ultimate good, because He knows the harm to us that can result if we have other idols.

Well what does Christ say in His admonition? He says, “Remember your former works and repent, or else I will remove your lamp stand from you.” I don’t know. There may be a Christian church in Turkey today, but most of Turkey is Islamic. We no longer hear of any of the seven churches. Maybe these people failed to heed the Lord’s warning. Now is the situation hopeless?

Participant: No.

Don: Not at all. It seems so at first, but no. Absolutely not.

1 John 1:9. We love that promise. It’s a very comforting promise, because it not only says that God will be *“faithful and just to forgive our sins”* if we confess our lack of love for Him and one another, but *“to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* We must ask God for the ability and the grace of repentance. Repentance is a gift of His grace. It’s not something, as Bruce said time and time again, that we just do once. It’s every day. Do you think God is going to disregard a sincere prayer of repentance? Lord, please restore my first love? Please restore the love that has grown cold? It happens over and over again for us. God is glad to hear that kind of a prayer.

The means of grace are obviously helpful—reading His word, praying, fellowshiping. One of the things that is helpful for me, when I find myself getting mechanical in my prayer life, is to meditate for example and pray the promises in Ephesians chapter 1, all the great promises there, that we have been chosen before the foundation of the world, that we have been predestined in love to be holy, that we have been adopted as His sons, etc. These are great promises. Meditate on those. Pray them. It’s a great help to me. Praying the Psalms is a wonderful way to draw close to the Lord.

And so, in order to have our love restored, we need to ask God for the ability to have that happen and to repent, and to have it restored.

And then we have Christ’s great motivation to do this in verse 7. He says this. *“To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”* Sig, would you read Genesis 3:24 and Revelation 22:14?

Sig: Certainly. Genesis 3:24. *“So He drove out the man and He placed the cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.”* Revelation 22:14. *“Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, that they may enter from the gates into the city.”*

Don: Okay. I think that this is an evidence of the supernatural nature of this book. It begins in Genesis with the tree of life that was taken away from Adam and Eve and us, and it ends with the restoration of the tree of life. It’s very interesting. And it says that we have access to that tree of life if we are in Him. And if we overcome by His grace, we will have the right to eat from that tree of life.

When Sig read from Revelation 22:14, obviously He is not saying that we earn anything by keeping His commandments, but that this is evidence that we are truly His, and that we will have access to the tree of life, and all the benefits and blessings. We have the means of grace. We have the promise of the Holy Spirit and the promise of Christ that

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“He who began a good work in you will complete it to the day of Christ Jesus.” And the great truth is that whatever losing your first love means, it can never mean that we will be severed from Christ. That’s for sure. And that’s a great comfort. Does anybody have any questions or comments before we end?

Participant: Don, we don’t have time now. But it would be good to explore, when it says that you’ve lost your first love, we usually think of love as being a feeling.

Don: Yes.

Participant: And the way you’ve been talking, it’s almost like that. We know that we’re not as zealous, that we’re not as we were at the early part of our marriages. But I think that bears looking at more closely, because we could all feel that we’re far from the mark if we don’t have strong feelings as we did when we first met Christ. And I think it’s like the difference between a 100-yard dash and a marathon. A 100-yard dash is a lot of energy and emotion. A marathon has a more calculated strategy to get through the 26 miles. And I think about Jesus saying, *“He who endures to the end will be saved.”* So I think that if love fits into the enduring, versus the emotion of how zealous are we, or are our prayers mechanical? I mean, gee whiz, my prayers are mechanical most of the time. I don’t feel that’s necessarily a bad thing, any more than mechanically getting through a marathon. I mean, it’s not quite like a hundred-yard dash; I’ve got to go, go, go! A marathon is okay; it’s more calculated. You do the same thing with one foot in front of the other, one foot in front of the other for 26 miles. I’m not questioning you, Don.

Don: Oh no, no, no! I think you make a very good point.

Participant: I think that bears looking at more closely at what we really mean. Losing your first love—what does that mean?

Second Participant: I was just thinking when Sig asked the question about the book of Acts. John wrote Revelation. He also wrote the gospel of John. In the gospel of John at the Last Supper Jesus talked about love. And He said, *“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you,”* and that *“if you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love.”* There He spells out what He means. It’s loving one another.

Participant: Yes.

Don: Yes. Okay.

Participant: And obviously some of that had gotten lost.

Second Participant: Right. And when I think about loving others I especially think about my own church. Ultimately, loving is done with people I don’t especially like. I think that’s a much greater task.

Don: Yes.

Participant: I mean, those who we find attractive, charming, winsome, accommodating, those ones are easy to do a lot of favors for. But what about the jerks who are ignorant, loud, and other things? That is a much harder person to give your life for. And that doesn’t depend on feelings.

Don: Right. And also in 1 Corinthians 13, beginning with verse 4, Paul describes the characteristics of love. But it’s all action oriented and adjectives, not feelings. So Ted, your point is well taken.

“Our Ultimate Priority”

Participant: If I may, Don, I’ll comment that when Ted was reading that in 1 Corinthians 13, I was thinking that the love there is *agape* love.

Don: Yes.

Participant: It’s God’s love for us, not our love. So although you can do all those things but have never experienced God’s love for you, it amounts to nothing.

Don: True, although in the next few verses he talks about the characteristics of love, and God produces that in us. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Brave Men.

Let us pray. Father, I pray that everything that I have said this morning is from Your word. Father, if there was anything said that was amiss, that was not your truth, I pray that You would nullify that, and Lord, that only your truth would shine. Father, I know that I am guilty many times of losing my first love. And if any of us are, Father, I pray that You would restore us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We thank You, Father, that Your only-begotten Son loves us enough to encourage us and to rebuke us when necessary. And so, Father, we pray that You would dismiss us with Your blessing, in Jesus’ name. And all the Brave Men said, “Amen.” (*Applause*)