

CAUSES FOR DECLENSION

Revelation 1:12-18—And I turned back to see the voice which spoke with me; and having turned, I saw seven golden lamps, and in the midst of the seven lamps one like the Son of man, clothed with a garment reaching to the feet, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle: his head and hair white like white wool, as snow; and his eyes as a flame of fire; and his feet like fine brass, as burning in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters; and having in his right hand seven stars; and out of his mouth a sharp two-edged sword going forth; and his countenance as the sun shines in its power.

And when I saw him I fell at his feet as dead; and he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the living one: and I became dead, and behold, I am living to the ages of ages, and have the keys of death and of hades.

Revelations 2:1-4—To the angel of the assembly in Ephesus write: These things says he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lamps:

I know thy works and thy labour, and thine endurance, and that thou canst not bear evil men; and thou hast tried them who say that themselves are apostles and are not, and hast found them liars; and endurest, and hast borne for my name's sake, and hast not wearied: but I have against thee, that thou hast left thy first love.

Revelations 3:14-17—And to the angel of the assembly in Laodicea write: These things says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. Thus because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and am grown rich, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art the wretched and the miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

Let's have a word of prayer:

Lord, we do want to thank Thee for gathering us together. We have read Thy word, and now we just look to Thy Holy Spirit to reveal Thy word to us. Bring us into one with Thy living word, that Thy word would truly become life and spirit to us. May Thy light shine upon us and reveal all that Thou hast seen in us, that we may truly humble ourselves and repent before Thee. We praise and thank Thee because Thou art the God of grace, and Thy grace and Thy mercy endures forever. We ask in the name of our dear Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

As we have been considering the recovering of the testimony of Christ, we have stated that this is not just a theme for us to talk about but it is a truth or a reality. It is something we have to take to heart. And by the grace of God and by His Holy Spirit, we are to be led into the recovery of the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The apostle John was one who was closest to our Lord Jesus. He knew the Lord, in a sense, more than anybody else on earth. We can say that he was one who truly knew the Lord. But when he was exiled on the island of Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus, he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and he saw a vision. We call it

the Patmos vision. It was a vision or revelation of our Lord Jesus that he had never seen before. There is always something more in our Lord Jesus that we have not seen and do not know. No matter how much we think we know our Lord Jesus, we will discover that He is far more than we actually know. He is infinite.

THE SEVEN GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS

The apostle John saw something of our Lord that he had never known before. He saw seven golden *lampstands*, and in the midst of the lampstands was one like the Son of Man. Now we all know that the seven lampstands stand for the seven churches in Asia, because this mystery is explained to us in verse 20: “The mystery of the seven stars which thou hast seen on my right hand, and the seven golden lamps.—The seven stars are angels of the seven assemblies; and the seven lamps are seven assemblies.”

As a matter of fact, the seven golden lampstands serve as the background, and the One who stood in the midst of the seven golden lampstands is in the foreground. The church is only a background for Christ Jesus. We cannot just see the church and not Christ. If there is no Christ, there is no church. But when we truly see Christ, then we can see the church as the background of our Lord Jesus.

In that vision John saw the Lord Jesus in His tenfold glory. He was one like a Son of Man. We know that the Son of Man is a term that the Lord Jesus used of Himself frequently while He was in the flesh. And He was well known to the apostle John, but somehow in this vision He looked a little different. And John said, “He looks like a Son of Man.” He knew the Lord Jesus so well when He was in the day of His humiliation, but now he was seeing the Lord in glory. This is the reason John said that He looked like the Son of Man whom he knew. He found that it was very different because He was no longer in the day of His humiliation; He is now in glory.

Christ Our Righteousness

John saw this Son of Man “clothed with a garment reaching to His feet.” We know that *garment* in the Scripture always represents “righteousness.” So this means that Christ is our righteousness, and it is a perfect, full righteousness. On the other hand, we know that the priests who served in the temple also wore long garments. So our Lord Jesus is not only the One who is righteousness, but He is also our great High Priest.

Christ Our High Priest

What is the Lord doing today in heaven? I remember a story of an elderly sister who wanted to be baptized. She was being questioned by the elders, and one of them asked her this question: “What is the Lord doing in heaven?” The elderly sister thought a while and answered: “He is looking down from heaven and finding fault with me.” I do not know whether she passed or not.

When we read the book of Hebrews, we discover a living truth—our Lord Jesus is our High Priest and He ever liveth to make intercession for us. We can be Christians today and live a Christian life only because He is our great High Priest. Our Lord Jesus serves us every moment of the day with all that He accomplished while he was on earth. We cannot live a Christian life without knowing that our Lord Jesus is our High Priest. His ministry in heaven is as important as His ministry on earth.

In the book of Revelation, we find another aspect of His being the great High Priest, and it is not just to each individual believer. Of course, we need Him as our High Priest every day, and we are receiving His ministry day by day. But sometimes we forget that while He is in heaven as the great High Priest, He is actually ministering in the true tabernacle. In other words, He is there ministering to the church.

While John was in exile he was unable to minister to these churches in Asia. So most likely, on the Lord's day, he would have been sitting on a rock looking over the sea. He would have been able to faintly see the outline of Asia Minor, and he was thinking of the churches that he ministered to before he was exiled. He probably wondered what the conditions of these churches were because he was so burdened for them. Then he was given this vision. He realized that even though he had been taken away from these churches that he loved, there is a great High Priest who is ministering to the seven golden lampstands unceasingly. How this comforted his heart! We know that our Lord Jesus is in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. He never leaves His beloved church, and He is always interceding and ministering to His own.

The Golden Girdle

“And girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle.” We know that in the old days when a person wore a long garment and wanted to do some work, he had to use a girdle to bind up that long garment. Otherwise, it would interfere with his working. But strangely, we see that this girdle is not around his waist but over his breast. In other words, it shows us that the work of redemption that He accomplished is already finished, but the same spirit of love is in Him. While He was on earth, He girded up His garment and served people. And now that He is in heaven, He is still girded on the basis of His accomplished work, and He is ministering to His church.

Wisdom Personified

“His head and hair white like white wool, as snow.” White hair usually represents wisdom, but so far as human beings are concerned it may not be true. Sometimes you see a person with white hair and he is a fool. But the Lord Jesus is full of wisdom. As a matter of fact, He is wisdom itself. In the book of Proverbs, we find that wisdom is personified, and that is none other than the Lord Jesus.

The Eyes that See into the Heart

“And his eyes as a flame of fire.” This means that He has extraordinary sight. When Simon was first led to the Lord Jesus, the Bible says that He looked him all over—maybe with a look from his head to his feet. And this look closed the mouth of Simon. Simon was a very talkative person, which was his human nature. But when the Lord looked at him, he was speechless. When the Lord Jesus looks, it is not at appearance but into the very heart. When Simon met the Lord, the Lord looked at him and knew what he was going to be—not only his past but his present and also his future. There is nothing that is hidden before the eyes of our Lord Jesus. We may hide ourselves from the sight of man but before the Lord, all things are naked.

The Brass Feet of Judgment

“And his feet like fine brass, as burning in a furnace.” In the Scriptures brass always represents judgment. In the temple the altar of sacrifice was made of brass, because brass represents judgment. What the Lord Jesus sees, He judges. His judgment is not according to appearance, but He judges as God judges. He judges a right judgment, because He sees everything through and through. You cannot judge until you see right. Our judgment is so undependable, but His judgment is according to righteousness.

The Mighty Voice

“And his voice as the voice of many waters.” It means His voice is so majestic. How powerful He is!

His Right Hand Holds the Seven Stars

“And having in His right hand seven stars.” This shows us that the messengers of the seven lampstands, which are the seven churches, are in His right hand. The right hand is the hand of might, of power and of responsibility. Therefore, all the people who are responsible for the churches are in the right hand of the Lord Jesus. He not only holds them responsible, but He supplies them with all their needs.

The Two-Edged Sword

“And out of his mouth a sharp two edged sword going forth.” The two-edged sword represents the living and operative word of God. It penetrates and divides the soul and spirit and exposes all the thoughts and intents of the heart.

His Countenance Shines

“And his countenance as the sun shines in its power.” In other words, we find all the beauty of our Lord Jesus is there.

This is the vision that John saw on the island of Patmos. He saw our Lord Jesus as someone he had never seen before. He realized for the first time that our Lord Jesus in heaven is the High Priest ministering to His own church. This is a new revelation to the apostle John. He saw the Lord Jesus as the great High Priest over His own sanctuary. In one word: the Lord Jesus is ministering to His churches.

JUDGMENT COMES BEFORE MINISTRY

Our first thought of the ministry of the Lord Jesus is probably that He supplies our every need. But ministry, in the right sense, does not begin with supplying the need. You cannot minister without first judging. If you cannot discern, if you cannot distinguish, how can you supply? So we find in the ministry of our Lord Jesus there is an element of judgment, which we usually neglect.

We think of one who ministers as someone who pats us on the shoulder and tells us everything is all right. That would be deceiving. Our Lord Jesus is so true and faithful, and here we see a picture of our Lord Jesus in His ministry above. And in this ministry the description that you see is of the One who judges. He is qualified to judge because He discerns everything. And what He sees, He judges, and what He judges, He supplies. Therefore His supply and support never fail.

Do you think that our Lord Jesus will not judge us? Thank God, He was judged on the cross in our stead. The judgment of the great white throne is over, and the judgment of eternal life and death is already decided. He was judged and has delivered us from that great judgment, and now we are His beloved. Do you think that because we are His beloved that He will never judge us again? If we are not disciplined, we are not loved. He is as a father who chastises his son. So there is an element of judgment that we have to see.

Today, God's people do not like to hear the word *judgment*. We say the judgment is already over. But whom the Father loves, He chastises, or we may say that when He judges us, it is for positive results. It is discipline, it is child training, and it is very positive. He disciplines us in order to bring us into His glory. Without discipline we will never grow up and will remain as babes in Christ. Although God wants sons, we cannot grow up into sonship until we are disciplined.

The same thing is true with the church. Today, our Lord Jesus is judging His own church. 1 Peter 4:17 says, "For the time of having the judgment begin from the house of God is come." When the apostle Peter wrote his first epistle, he told us that the time of judgment had already begun in the house of God, and this is what we see in that Patmos vision. He judges that He may perfect it.

PENTECOST

From the book of Acts we see what a glorious beginning the church had on earth. The Holy Spirit came down from heaven and filled the whole house, and all one hundred and twenty people were baptized in one Spirit into one body. They all testified and witnessed to the Lord, and when the rumor went out, many people in Jerusalem began to gather. We believe that it did not take place in that upper room where the disciples had gathered because that room probably could not have accommodated that many people. More than likely, they moved to Solomon's porch and many people gathered around them. Peter stood up with the eleven (collective), and Peter preached the first gospel message. He declared: "What you see and hear proves that the One whom you crucified has been crowned as Lord and Christ" (see Acts 2:36). And because of this message which witnessed and testified to the testimony of Jesus, three thousand people were converted and baptized.

THE HARMONY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

The early church was so glorious. They were all together, they broke bread together, they prayed together, and they were all delivered from self-possessiveness. We know that self-possessiveness is an instinct in human nature. We see this even in little children as they are playing with their friends and sharing a toy. Then suddenly he says, "This is mine." This is self-possessiveness that is already there within him. Who can deliver us from self-possessiveness except the Lord Himself? Then something happened, and they began to live together in love and harmony. The Holy Spirit was so evident in their midst that the church had a glorious beginning.

THE OPPOSITION OF THE TESTIMONY BY SATAN

However, that does not mean there were no problems because the enemy of God hated to see the church maintaining the testimony of Jesus. He knows that the testimony of Jesus which the church has testified of will be his downfall. So he will try every means to pull down the church in order that they may not be able to testify the testimony of Jesus. And that will, in a sense, delay the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose.

Unfortunately, we cannot blame everything on Satan. In our fallen nature there is something that always responds to the temptation of Satan unless we allow the cross of Christ to work in our lives, putting the self-life to death, and allowing the life of Christ in us to be manifested. We find that there is always a "fifth columnist" in us—an ally with the enemy. Therefore, because of these two sides, even in the early church the enemy tried to slip in and tempt the old man in us to destroy the testimony.

THE MISSION OF THE EARLY CHURCH

We can see from the first four chapters of the book of Acts that everything was so glorious. The early church at that time was able to fulfill a mission, and that was to bear the testimony of Jesus. They were not there to proclaim themselves. They were there to proclaim the Lord Jesus and Him crucified. They were there to declare that our Lord Jesus is truly the Lord of all. He is the first and the last. He is the living One. He became dead, but He lives forever and ever. And He holds in His hands the keys of death and Hades. How gloriously they fulfilled their responsibility!

When we come to chapter 5, we find that many brothers and sisters, who came for Pentecost, were Jews from all the corners of the world, because this was one of the three times a year they had to come to the temple. But after they got saved and came into such a wonderful life together, they would not return home. That is the reason why those who had properties in Jerusalem not only opened their homes to all the brothers and sisters, but they also sold their properties in order to buy food for the ones who remained.

ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

Then there was the couple, Ananias and Sapphira. They saw other brothers and sisters selling their properties and laying the money at the feet of the apostles so that the poor ones among them could be supported. But instead of seeing this, they saw that those who did it were praised by people, and something from the enemy entered their hearts. They wanted the applause, so they sold their property; but secretly, they kept back a part of it and gave the rest to Peter. They deceived the Holy Spirit; but at that time the Holy Spirit was so prevailing. Immediately, Peter knew by the Holy Spirit what was happening, and you know the result. I often say, in the church there are always problems, but problems are not always problems. If they can be solved rightly, then they are blessings. If we cannot solve it, then it really becomes a problem.

ASSISTING WIDOWS

In chapter six of Acts, there were a great number of people gathered in Jerusalem at that time. Some were Hebrew Jews, who were the ones who dwelt in the promised land. And there were also Hellenistic Jews, and these were Jews who lived in foreign countries and had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost. There were also many widows among them, because life was very hard during this time, and the church tried to supply the needs of

the widows. But unfortunately, those who did the supplying were Hebrew Jews, so their widows were fully supplied. But they did not know much about the Hellenistic Jews, and as a result their widows were neglected. It was not intentional, but it shows that human beings are so limited. As a result of this neglect, there was murmuring, and as it began to grow, the consequence could have been rebellion. But thank God, the Holy Spirit was so prominent that, immediately, the apostles realized their weakness. And they opened it up to the brothers and sisters and let them choose seven men to take care of the food. Thank God, of the seven persons chosen, none—or maybe one—was a Hebrew Jew. They chose them from among the Hellenistic Jews. What love was displayed! There was no jealousy, but there was confidence and faith. The problem was solved, and the church prospered.

BAPTIZED INTO ONE BODY

In chapter 8, we find that Philip was greatly used by God in Samaria. Many came to the Lord, and even Simon the magician believed on the Lord. But when Peter and John came to Samaria, they laid hands on these believers and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Now why is this so? It is because the Samaritans and the Jews had nothing to do with each other. If the Holy Spirit had come on the Samaritans separately, then you would have a separate church. In one spirit we are baptized into one body, and there are neither Jews nor Gentiles. The Holy Spirit withheld Himself purposely until people from Jerusalem could come and lay hands on them, and this means identification. We are no longer Jews or Gentiles—we are one in Christ Jesus. When the Holy Spirit came, they were baptized into one body. Thank God, the Lord solved the problem, and the church overcame.

THE JUDAIZERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

In Acts 15, we find a bigger problem. There were Judaizers who had been devout Jews in the past, but had come to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus. However, the past still had a hold upon them, and they said, “You Gentiles, not only should you believe in the Lord Jesus, but you have to be circumcised and keep the law; otherwise you are not saved.” There was such a great controversy over this that they had a council in Jerusalem. Thank God, He overruled and solved the problem, but even though it was solved at that time, it continued on. Throughout the ministry of the apostle Paul, these Judaizers followed him and gave him much trouble.

So we see that in the first thirty-three years of the history of the church, it was glorious, but it did not mean there were no problems. But thank God, most of the problems were rightly solved.

THE MEANING OF DECLENSION

If we want to find the causes of declension, Revelation 1-3 is the first place we will find it. What do we mean by declension? When we say the church has fallen or the church has gone downwards, what do we mean? How do we measure this matter of declension? We may see the number of people becoming smaller, so we say that it is going downwards. But when we see thousands of people gathering, we call that success. But do we judge success and failure by outward numbers? How do we judge a church that declines or a church that grows? We do not judge it by anything that we know

because our judgment is never accurate. We do not have eyes like burning fire. Man looks at the appearance, but God looks at the heart. Our judgment is never right. But there is One who has the authority to judge, and He has a measurement to measure our failure or our growth.

THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF THE CHURCH

What do we mean by growth and by decline? When a church grows, by what measurement is it measured? When a church declines, by what measurement is it measured? This is why we see the vision of the Lord Jesus in the first chapter. The revelation of Jesus Christ constitutes His testimony. To put it rightly: the success or failure of the church is judged by the vision of the testimony of Jesus. The vision in chapter 1 is the measurement of the growth or decline of the church. This is the only measurement. This is the golden rod or the measurement of the sanctuary. That is why in every letter that our Lord Jesus wrote to the seven churches He always revealed a part of Himself to them at the beginning. And when you put the seven churches together, then you have the full revelation of our Lord Jesus. That is the testimony of Jesus, and that has been committed to the church. The church does not exist for itself; it exists for Christ. Unless the church can fulfill the testimony of Jesus, it fails. That is the criteria. So that is the reason why in every letter our Lord revealed Himself in part. It takes the whole church for the full revelation of Jesus Christ, and the church is responsible for what is revealed of Him to them. This is our responsibility.

THE LOSING OF FIRST LOVE

May we be delivered from all human measurements. Let us all be measured by the measurement of God. And when this standard is established, we can discover the causes of declension. For instance, in the church of Ephesus, if we judged by outward appearance, we would think this is a good church. But the Lord Jesus said, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thine endurance, and that thou canst not bear evil men; and thou hast tried them who say that themselves are apostles and are not, and hast found them liars; and endurest, and hast borne for my name's sake, and hast not wearied" (Revelation 2:2-3).

The church in Ephesus had labor, they had works, and they endured. They had the knowledge to distinguish whether there were true apostles or not, and they would not allow evil in their midst. Outwardly, they had everything good. If we could find a church as good as that, we would praise the Lord—and praise ourselves. But the Lord does not look upon these things. We care about these things—outward things, activities, appearance, knowledge, and numbers. But these things do not measure the decline or the growth of the church. Our Lord Jesus looks into the heart. In spite of all these things, the Lord Jesus says, "I *am* against you because you have lost your first love." It is a strong word. The Lord never looks at appearances, at activities, at numbers, or knowledge. The Lord only looks at the heart. Is our heart one with the Lord? Is there first love which is the spring of all outward things? If the spring is not there, everything is pretense, and the Lord hates pretense. What is the cause of declension? It is the losing of first love.

FIRST LOVE

What is first love? I can recall my own experience when I first believed in the Lord Jesus. I was under the burden of sin for a whole year, and then the Lord delivered me. I was so grateful that I wanted to give up everything to Him. It was as if nothing was too hard to give up, because He had won my heart. Is that first love? Yes, but gradually, it begins to cool down. We begin to consider ourselves, our environment, and other people. We begin to conform to other people. Our life with the Lord is not that absolute. We do not spend time with Him; therefore, we do not enjoy His presence. We may still read the Bible, but it is out of duty. As a result of that, there is not that inner spring. How easily we may lose our first love.

First love is not confined to the first time you believe in the Lord Jesus. First love is of first quality. It is like a chaste virgin whose heart is wholly occupied with her future bridegroom. Daily she prepares herself for her bridegroom. She does not live for herself; she lives for her future husband. First love is seeing the Lord with a single eye. We do not have evil eyes or a double mind to follow the Lord. The Lord is truly our first and last. He is the living One, and He is our life. He died for us and now lives forevermore. He holds the keys to death and Hades. Is the church maintaining that first love? If the church maintains its first love, then it maintains the testimony of Jesus. In the famous words of F.B. Meyer, the Lord says, "If I am not Lord of all, I am not Lord at all." That is first love. The church began to decline even though it was able to maintain an outward appearance. It seems to have all this so-called biblical knowledge, and it can do many commendable works—but where is the first love?

LAODICEA

We will look at the last church—Laodicea. We often say that Laodicea is the fallen state from the church in Philadelphia. The church in Philadelphia had the testimony of Jesus because they held fast the Head. But when you come to Laodicea, everything outward remained, but there was nothing inside. They were neither hot nor cold. We all love things that are neither cold nor hot but lukewarm. But the problem in Laodicea was spiritual pride. God had blessed them much, and by the grace of God, they entered into much of the truth of God. They may still have kept the word and not denied the name of God. They had a glorious past, but they lived on tradition, and they were proud of themselves. Before a fall, there is pride. Unfortunately, throughout the centuries, we have kept the outward and lost the inward. Do you think we need judgment? Will we surrender under the judgment of Christ? If we submit ourselves under the judgment of Christ, in due time He will raise us up. Thank God, we may fail, but the testimony of Jesus never fails.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, as we come under Thy judgment, as Thou hast looked upon us, Thou hast revealed to us the root of our decline. Have mercy upon us. Restore to us that first love, that You may be everything to us, that we may lay everything under Thy feet. Deliver us from so-called spiritual pride, that we may be meek and lowly as Thou art and follow thee. We ask in Thy name. Amen.