

The Love You Had at First (*Ephesus*)

July 17, 2022 from Revelation 2:1-7

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Please read Revelation 2:1-7 before reading this transcript.

Last Sunday we began our new sermon series, “Taking Revelation to Heart.” If you missed that first sermon, you’ll want to go back and listen to it online, because it lays out some ground rules for where we’re headed in the weeks to come.¹ In Revelation 1 Jesus commissions the apostle John to write down what He is revealing to the churches. In Revelation 1:19-20 Jesus tells John, “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” Now, the lampstand imagery seems pretty straightforward. Each church is like a lampstand. What do lampstands do? They hold the light, up off ground, so that it shines forth more brightly. And that’s what each of the 7 churches in Revelation is expected to do. In fact, that’s what every Christian church is expected to do: shine the light of Jesus, as clearly, and as brightly, as we can, to as many people as we can!² But what about these stars that represent “the angels of the 7 churches.” I didn’t know churches even HAD angels... did you? Well, the word translated here as “angel” can mean more broadly a “messenger.” In fact, “messenger” could actually refer to a human messenger, or a pastor. However, the evidence seems to point most directly to these being literal angels.³ The description here seems to indicate that they watched over the believers who were gathered in each of these particular locations.⁴ And the reason that the angels in John’s vision were pictured as stars is because “in the Jewish world [stars] represented angelic forces.”⁵ Now, as strange this idea of “angels watching over the churches” might sound to some of us, let’s keep in mind the rhetorical description of angels that we find in Hebrews 1:14, “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” In other words, angels serve God’s purposes in all kinds of ways. And the fact that each church in this vision

¹ <https://efcbemidji.org/sermons/>

² See Matthew 5:14-16 and Luke 11:33.

³ See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, pp. 98-99.

⁴ The Greek word that we translate for “church” literally means “assembly.” ἐκκλησία “a regularly summoned legislative body, assembly... an assemblage, gathering... people with shared belief, community, congregation.” William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 99.

has an angel assigned to it, illustrates that Jesus is actively watching over and providing for the needs of each particular church.^{6 7}

Jesus' letter to the church at Ephesus begins in Revelation 2:1, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." To be clear, this doesn't mean that Jesus' letter is only for the angel. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus" is simply a grammatical form of corporate address, so this letter is definitely intended for the entire church that gathered in the city of Ephesus.⁸ When Jesus writes His letter to the believers living in Ephesus, He highlights two particular aspects.⁹ First of all, He says that He holds the 7 stars in His right hand. Jesus' right hand symbolizes that He is in control, that these angels are serving under Jesus' power and authority. The second aspect that Jesus highlights is that He walks among the 7 golden lampstands.¹⁰ This communicates at least two things. First of all, Jesus walks AMONG the churches...

1) ...as a comforting reminder. In the midst of persecution, and suffering for their faith, they are NOT alone; Jesus is right there AMONG them. Jesus also walks AMONG the churches...

2) ...as a commissioning reminder. "[Christ] is always in their midst and therefore is keenly aware of how they are living."¹¹ This accountability is directly connected to the church's role as a lampstand. A New Testament scholar named Grant Osborne, says it this way: "We are all called to accountability from the fact that we are his 'lampstands,' called to be lights in this world, to take his message to the ends of the earth."¹²

⁶ Now, that said, we should be careful here not to fall into any kind of false practice of angel worship. That actually begins to happen to John himself at the end of Revelation in chapter 22:8-9. The angel commands John NOT to do this, but rather to worship God alone! In other words, we should not worship angels, nor pray to angels, nor try to access angels for help. Through Jesus Christ, each believer has direct access to God. Hebrews 4:16 reminds us, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." We don't need any kind of mediator to gain access to God, other than our all-sufficient Mediator, Jesus Christ. We don't need a priest or pastor, or a Saint, or an angel, or any other kind of mediator.

As to the question of whether E-Free Bemidji has a particular guardian angel assigned to our church, that's certainly possible, but Scripture is not particularly clear on this. After all, John is not giving a theological tutorial on "guardian angels," He's seeing a vision and doing his best to describe it to us. This particular vision does not necessarily represent God's standard Mode of Operation for how things work at every church. What we can be sure of is this: Jesus watches over and protects E-Free Bemidji by whatever means He chooses.

⁷ The presence of angels is "a reminder that divine forces are at work and watching." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 111.

⁸ See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, middle of p. 99.

⁹ As we examine each of these 7 letters, we'll find that each of them highlights some particular aspect of Christ's character. These aspects are pulled from the description of the Glorified Christ in chapter 1. As we examine each of the 7 churches over the next several weeks, we'll discover that Christ highlights a particular aspect about Himself that "is perfectly chosen to address the needs of that [particular] church." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 111.

¹⁰ Note Revelation 1:13, "AMONG the lampstands."

¹¹ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 229.

¹² Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 101.

Now Ephesus was an impressive city! “During the 1C AD Ephesus was the fourth largest city [in the entire] Roman Empire...with an estimated population of 250,000.”¹³

So, on our map here, up in the north, we see the Black Sea and Istanbul, in modern-day Turkey. In the SW corner of what used to be Asia Minor, is the Island of Patmos, where John was exiled when he received this Revelation from Jesus. About 50 miles NE of Patmos we see Ephesus, on the east coast of the Aegean Sea. And then in a clockwise circle, we see the other 6 churches: Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. (*We'll learn about each of these in the coming weeks*).

Ephesus is now about 3 miles inland¹⁴ because the Cayster¹⁵ River silted over, but during the time of the 1st century church, Ephesus was “a major port city and commercial center.”¹⁶ You see, Ephesus was not only located on the Aegean Sea, but it was also located at a major crossroads in the Roman roadway system throughout Asia Minor.¹⁷ This insured that all kinds of people and goods flowed through the city by land and by sea, from all directions.



¹³ Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, p. 203.

¹⁴ Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, p. 202.

¹⁵ Cayster = “K stir”

¹⁶ Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, p. 203.

¹⁷ Learn more at <https://www.anatolianroads.org/> Anatolia is another name for Asia Minor.

My wife Debbie and I were blessed to be able to visit Ephesus over my sabbatical.^{18 19} The locals call it “Efes,” which is located about a mile from the modern-day city of Selcuk.²⁰

Selcuk has the Ephesus Museum. Here we were able to see one of the famous statues of Artemis as well as a miniaturized replica of her temple.²¹



Some of you may remember that we talked about the Temple of Artemis back in Acts 19. The temple of the goddess Artemis was 1 of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World. It was 4x the size of our church sanctuary and 2x as tall.^{22 23} Revelation 2:7 says, “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” This may very well be a pushback against the Temple of Artemis, since reportedly the tree was of the temple. In other words, Jesus is reminding them that true paradise comes from God’s tree, not the tree of Artemis!^{24 25}

²⁶ I appreciate how New Testament scholar G. K. Beale puts it: “in Genesis 2–3 the image of the “tree of life” together with the “paradise of God” symbolizes the life-giving presence of God, from which Adam and Eve are separated when they are cast out of the garden paradise. Revelation speaks of the...restoration of this divine presence... [i.e.] the “tree” refers to the redemptive effects of the cross, which bring about the restoration of God’s presence.”²⁷ In other words, it’s not the tree that sustains our eternal life with God, it’s what the tree symbolizes: Jesus’ finished work on the cross.

¹⁸ Ephesus is by far the “most developed site in Turkey.” Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, p. 205.

¹⁹ “Except for the interruptions of the two world wars, [the Austrian Archaeological Institute has] continued their archaeological work at Ephesus for over a century.” Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, pp. 205, 208.

²⁰ “SELL chook”

²¹ The craftsmen in Paul’s day made silver shrines similar to this and sold them for a tidy profit! *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2261 footnote on Acts 19:24.

²² It was “425 feet long and 220 feet wide, having 127 white marble columns 62 feet high and less than four feet apart... In the inner sanctuary was the many-breasted image supposedly dropped from heaven.” (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1866 footnote on Acts 19:27.) Our church sanctuary is roughly 120’ long by 60’ wide by 30’ high, which means the Temple of Artemis was almost 4 times the size and about twice as high as our church sanctuary. So picture a space that is 4x as big and 2x as tall and then try to imagine a line of massive marble columns spaced every 4 feet. Imagine a 60’ foot high marble column in the middle of every 3rd chair of our sanctuary.

²³ It “had literally thousands of priests and priestesses, many of them sacred prostitutes.” Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 109.

²⁴ The Temple of Artemis was later “destroyed by the Goths in 262 AD; ...it was never rebuilt.” Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, pp. 208-209.

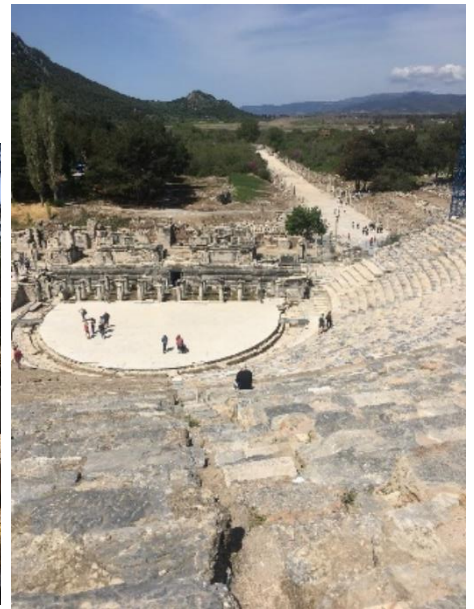
²⁵ “Perhaps the Old Testament tree of life was chosen as emblematic of Christian reward because a tree image was long associated either with the goddess Artemis or with Ephesus, where the great Artemis temple flourished. What paganism promised only Christianity as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes could deliver.” G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 236.

²⁶ In fact, it may be that the Temple of Artemis had a tree that people would touch when they visited there. Mentioned in the DVD “The 7 Churches of Revelation” hosted by Joe Stowell, President of Cornerstone University, by Our Daily Bread 2013.

²⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 235.

Ephesus also had a HUGE theater, which is still there today. You can see it off in the distance there, built into the hillside. It seated some 20,000 people! I took the

picture on the right while sitting on top of the theater looking down (so almost a 180 degree opposite angle from the other picture).²⁸ If you're familiar with the riot in Ephesus from Acts 19, this



theater is right where it occurred. If you look in the middle of the picture on the right, where you see that white stone stage, that's the spot where they chanted "Great is Artemis, of the Ephesians" for 2 straight hours!²⁹ (*Deb and I had the privilege of standing right there.*) Since Ephesus contained this massive commercial trade center, a huge theater, the famous Temple of Artemis, and many other attractions as well, it made it a perfect place to declare the gospel!³⁰ That's exactly why the apostle Paul spent over 2 years teaching there, during his 3rd Missionary Journey!^{31 32 33}

And so, it's no surprise that there was a thriving church in Ephesus. Here's what Jesus writes to them in Revelation 2:2-3, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." What an encouraging thing for Jesus to tell this church! As He's walking among them, He sees their hard work, their perseverance, and their unwillingness to tolerate

²⁸ The commercial marketplace was located right near the bottom edge of the theater. In Acts 19, when the riot first got going, this marketplace is the most likely place from which the riot spread.

²⁹ "The West Gate of the agora [i.e. market] led to the harbor, and through this gate goods were brought from throughout the Mediterranean to be sold in its stalls. Here merchants and craftsmen from the city's various guilds plied their trade. This included Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila who undoubtedly practiced their trade of tentmaking/leatherworking here. Here too the silversmiths sold their silver shrines of Artemis.... The riot probably began in the agora and then spilled into the theater nearby." Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, p. 220.

³⁰ "The church was apparently established by Priscilla and Aquila, who had been left there by Paul...and they were aided by Apollos. Paul returned and spent [over] two years [there]...apparently using Ephesus as a center for evangelizing the whole region. Later the church struggled with false teachers." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 109.

³¹ "At least fourteen other deities have been identified with pagan temples in Ephesus in the 1C AD." Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, p. 203.

³² Back in Acts 19:9-12 we learned, "...So Paul...took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them."

³³ The fact is, Ephesus "served as a base for preaching to the entire province of Asia." Mark Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, Corrected 3rd edition, Yayinlari, Istanbul, TK, 2014, p. 205.

wickedness.³⁴ You see, it's all too easy for churches to lose their distinctiveness and to become just like the culture around them.³⁵ That would have been easy for the Ephesian believers to do, but they held their ground. Jesus also mentions that they "have tested those who claimed to be apostles but are not." This brings to mind Paul's tearful farewell to the Ephesian Elders back in Acts 20, which included a sobering warning. In Acts 20:29-31 Paul warned, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! ..." ³⁶ Paul had issued this warning some 40 years earlier, and apparently the Ephesian church really took it to heart. In fact, after hearing this warning way back in the '50s, they were still putting it into practice in the '90s. And Jesus commended them for it in the book of Revelation!³⁷ So when it came to false teachers, the church in Ephesus tackled them head-on.^{38 39 40} By the way, these false apostles are likely the people specified in verse 6 as Nicolaitans.^{41 42} We'll learn more about them when we get to the Pergamum Church in verse 15.⁴³

Well, so far so good, right? Jesus seems pretty pleased with the believers in Ephesus. And He is pleased with them, except for 1 thing, and it's not a small thing. In Revelation 2:4-5 Jesus goes on to say, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. [*And then He says...*] 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." (*Of the 7 churches, Ephesus is the only to get this warning.*) Wow! This is most certainly worth paying attention to! Jesus is SO displeased with this particular aspect of the Ephesian church, that if they don't repent, and do the things they did at first, He will come and remove the church from the city of Ephesus. So what exactly is going on here in the Ephesian Church? What does Jesus mean by "the love you had at first" and "the things you did at first"? Well, frankly, Jesus doesn't specify what He means by this. Certainly, the 1st century church in Ephesus

³⁴ 1 Thessalonians 1:3 says, "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."

³⁵ "their churches all too often resemble their cities." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 110.

³⁶ Paul also warns in 1 Timothy 1:3-11, "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer..."

³⁷ Also note Revelation 2:6. We'll talk about the Nicolaitans when we get to the church in Pergamum in Revelation 2:15

³⁸ "Apparently, these heretics...acted like wandering missionaries/teachers and went from house church to house church calling themselves 'apostles.' ... the Ephesian church had now triumphed over them." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 113.

³⁹ Church history tells us that "Ephesus later became known as a church that would not tolerate false teachers." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 114.

⁴⁰ Other churches faced similar threats. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 warns, "For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 15 It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve."

⁴¹ See comments by Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 113, footnote #10.

⁴² "NIK oh LAY uh tuhn" W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 123.

⁴³ "In the early church false prophets were detected primarily through examination of behavior or teaching." G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 230.

knew exactly what He was saying, but they're not here to tell us. We don't really have enough information to narrow this down and be certain, whether Jesus is referring to their love for God, or their love for one another, or their love for the lost. So it's probably best for us to consider all three of these loves. In other words, "the love you had at first" is best considered comprehensively, as a way of talking about the initial passion of their Christian faith, when they first came to Christ. "The love you had at first" seems to refer to the earliest days of their faith, when their salvation was brand new. Apparently, after an initial "flush of enthusiasm and excitement," they had settled into more of a daily grind.⁴⁴ They had moved away from a passionate faith, toward being more like roommates, or business partners with God. Yes, they had their doctrine straight, but they'd forsaken love.

You see, the Ephesian Church was one of the oldest, most established churches in the area. It had been around for some 40 years. Long enough to lose its initial passion, long enough to settle in and get comfortable.⁴⁵ We might say they were resting on their laurels. Romans 12:11 urges us, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Brother or sister in Christ, as we approach our church's 100-year anniversary, we need to pray about this very thing: that God would stir up our zeal for Him, that He would help us keep our spiritual fervor, "the love we had at first," when we first came to faith. We need an ever-renewing love for God and people so that we can continue serving the LORD wholeheartedly for many years to come!

In Mark 12:30-31 Jesus reminds His disciples, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." Life's busyness, and all the competing priorities and distractions in this life, can hinder us from loving the way that we should. So it's incredibly important for us to reflect back to the days of our initial love and passion for the Lord, that fueled our devotion to Him, that overflowed into love for other people. Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus is a much needed, timely reminder for us, not to "forsake the love we had at first."⁴⁶ So, with this in mind, what do you suppose Jesus meant in verse 5 by, "Repent and do the things you did at first"? He doesn't give us a specific list. And yet, if we think back to "the love we had at first," it might help us remember the things we used to enjoy doing.

⁴⁴ See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 115.

⁴⁵ It could even be that succeeding generations were becoming less and less enthused about the things of the Lord, failing to maintain the fervor of the first generation of the church. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 115.

⁴⁶ How good it is when our zeal and fervor for the Lord can be first and foremost in our hearts and minds as we go throughout our day. In Jeremiah 2:2 the LORD calls out to His people, "...I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown." Jeremiah is saying that, back in the early days, back in her youth, Israel's devotion to the LORD was intimate and special. But now "the love they had at first," had grown cold. Consider Mathew 24:12.

Can you remember, back to the earliest days of your walk with Christ?

Early in our Christian faith, we were blown away by our fresh understanding of God's redemptive love. We couldn't read our Bibles enough, couldn't pray enough, couldn't worship often enough or sing loud enough. But perhaps, over time, our daily appreciation for God's love has diminished. Perhaps we've begun to take His love for us for granted. Maybe we've faded into a pattern of loving Him with only a portion of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. *(By the way, a simple way to measure what we love is to examine our personal spending. How we spend two particular things: our time and our money. Our time in serving with kingdom priorities, and our money in generosity toward others and in our tithes and offerings.)*

Early in our Christian faith, we were blown away by our fellowship with other believers. We couldn't get enough of God's family, being with our new brothers and sisters in Christ, enough conversations with other Christians, enough days of the week to attend church services, Christian events, and small group. But perhaps, over time, we've been hurt by another believer, or disappointed by the church, or let down in some way. We began to attend church less. We got busy and preoccupied with our hobbies or career or whatever else. Being around other believers became a once-a-week thing, and then, eventually, a once or twice a month thing, and maybe it's on the way to becoming a once/twice a year thing.

Early in our Christian faith, we were so blown away by Jesus, that we just couldn't wait to tell others about Him!⁴⁷ We wanted to share the Good News with everyone. It just poured out of us, out of the overflow of love and gratitude in our hearts. And we were eager to serve, eager to volunteer, eager to participate in church ministry and missions. But perhaps, over time, our excitement about Jesus tapered off. Sure, we're still very thankful for our salvation, and thankful to have a personal relationship with God, but we've become less eager to talk about it with other people. We've grown content to be quiet about it; we've become ok with just keeping it to ourselves...

⁴⁷ My mom will tell you the story about me calling from summer camp when I first became a Christian. Jesus was the best thing that EVER happened to me, and I wanted everyone to know. I remember jumping into Bible reading and memorization. I was praying at every meal, engaging people in conversations about my faith, inviting people to youth group and church, especially in the early years of my faith.