

2ND HONEYMOON

*Putting the spark back into
your relationship with the Lord.*

By **GREG SIDERS**

On a hot summer afternoon a few years ago, a Sunday drive changed my life.

After church my wife and I spontaneously decided to pack our three boys into the minivan and just drive. Forty-five minutes later we found ourselves meandering through my hometown, and, since we were close to the house I had lived in during my high school years, I decided to take my kids to see where their dad grew up.

As we neared the house, memories flooded my mind. I could see in my mind's eye the mint-green stucco and the huge picture window in the living room. I could see the orange shag carpeting and the TV above the piano, where my family had watched *The Waltons* together every week. I could see the garage underneath the house, where my dad helped me rebuild the engine of my 1972 Toyota Corolla. I could see the winding driveway, where my mom had put a hand-sewn beige cloth seat cover over the vinyl in our old GMC pickup, so that I would have something nice to drive to the prom. I could see the batting cage down in the citrus grove, where my dad and I would go every day after he got home from work, to practice hitting.

As I drove toward that house, I wondered how it had changed over the years. But nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. The house was vacant. There was a *For Sale* sign in the front lawn. The grass was dead. The ground cover on the hills had been stripped away. Half of the shingles on the roof were missing, or lying in the midst of the other trash on the lawn. There was a rickety

wooden fence blocking access to the citrus grove. It was a mess.

And it just tore me up inside. There was so much history there, so many good memories. How could something that was once so full of life become so dead? Why had it been neglected? Who allowed it to slowly fall apart?

I was reflecting on what I saw when it hit me: It had been almost 20 years to the day since I had given my heart to Jesus Christ, in that very house. It was the summer after my sophomore year in college, while I was lying in bed, that Jesus called me to follow Him.

How passionately I loved Jesus in those early days! My spiritual life was strong and full of life and warmth ... just like my home. So I couldn't help but wonder to what extent the condition of the house 20 years later paralleled the condition of my relationship with Jesus Christ.

IF SOMEONE HAD SAID TO ME 20 YEARS AGO that someday I would be struggling to recapture the romance of my relationship with Christ, I would have thought, "No way, not me." The difference that He made in my life was so dramatic and so exhilarating that I could not imagine Him and me ever growing apart.

I think that's exactly the way most members of the church in Ephesus felt when Paul wrote his letter to them in AD 60. It had only been a few years since the apostle had preached the gospel to them, and they were

still in “the honeymoon stage” of their relationship with Jesus. All indications were that they were spiritually vibrant. They were rejoicing in God’s grace and loving one another deeply. They were just learning how to use their spiritual gifts and how to let their love for Jesus impact their marriage and family and working relationships. The church was healthy, and their love for Jesus was burning brightly.

So I wonder whether they really took to heart the subtle exhortation that they received from Paul in the very last sentence of the letter. It’s in verse 24 of chapter 6 where, out of the blue, Paul adds this postscript to his letter: *P.S.: Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.*

If love for Jesus can be pictured as a fire, Paul is saying, “Grace to those who never let the flame go out. Grace to those who do whatever it takes to keep their passion for the Lord burning brightly.” The word “undying” could also be translated “incorruptible”, which brings to my mind a picture of a house. “Grace to those who don’t let their relationship with Jesus decay, who don’t let it fall apart due to neglect.”

Like me, the Ephesians probably said, “It’s not going to happen. I will always love Jesus as intensely as I do right now. With all that He has done for me, how could I ever stop loving Him?”

But that was a long time ago. Fast-forward 35 years to AD 95, which is about the time the Book of Revelation was written. It is in chapter 2 of that book that Jesus delivers to the Ephesian church a report card on the state of their relationship with Him.

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.... You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

—Revelation 2:2-3, 6

That’s an impressive report card! The Ephesians get almost all “A”s.

- They get an “A” in good works. “*I know your deeds,*” Jesus says to them. He commends them for letting the light of their good deeds shine before men.

- They get an “A” in diligence. Jesus tells them, “*I know your hard work.*” They’re not lazy Christians. They are faithful servants who expend a great amount of energy in their labors for the Lord.
- They get an “A” in endurance. “*I know your perseverance. You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary.*” They have taken a licking and kept on ticking. They have remained loyal to Jesus in the face of severe persecution.
- They get an “A” in doctrinal purity. “*I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.*” That’s good; the church is free of heresy, and has dealt firmly with false teachers.
- And they get an “A” in holiness. We don’t know exactly what the Nicolaitans taught, but whatever it was, it involved some type of moral compromise. It was their practices, their lifestyle, that Jesus hated. And the Ephesians share that hatred of unholiness.

This is a rock-solid church! In almost every visible aspect of church life, they are a model congregation.

BUT JESUS NOT ONLY SEES WHAT IS VISIBLE;

He also sees what is invisible. When it comes to their actions, they’re a 4.0 church. But when it comes to their heart, they get an “F”.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

—Revelation 2:4

The word “forsaken” may be a little too strong, because it implies a conscious, premeditated choice. But literally the word means to “cease”, or to “let go of” or to “drift away from.” In other words, the Ephesians never sat down and said, “Loving Jesus doesn’t matter to us anymore.” Their drift was not intentional, it was unconscious. It wasn’t sudden, it was gradual.

Their love dissipated at the rate that a house becomes dilapidated. It didn’t happen overnight. It happened so slowly that you couldn’t even see the change from day to day. But when you look at the snapshots of the bright flame of their passion for Jesus 35 years ago and of the dying embers of their devotion to Him today, the contrast is

dramatic. Externally, they look good. But internally, they're cold and lifeless.

BUT IS THAT REALLY SUCH A BIG DEAL TO

God? Especially when so many other things are going well? Does it really matter to Him whether or not my heart beats faster when I think of Him—so long as I am being faithful and obedient and pure?

Yes, it does. What is the first and greatest commandment?

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your mind."*

—Matthew 22:37

According to Jesus, nothing matters more to God than that we love Him wholeheartedly. Obedience without love is nothing more than grim duty. Faithfulness without love is like an arranged marriage. Purity without love is about as warm as an operating room. God doesn't want me just to serve Him. He wants me to love Him.

It should be obvious that Jesus is talking about something that has an emotional element to it, but I haven't always thought of love for God in that way. That's because the Greek word for love in Matthew 22:37, *agape*, is generally an action-oriented word. It's not something you *feel* so much as it is something you *do*. For instance, it was *agape* love that sent Jesus to the cross. When He was on the cross, I doubt He had ooey-goopy feelings for me. But He was committed to doing what was best for me, at all costs. That's *agape*. And, because *agape* is primarily an action word, I sucked all the emotion out of it. I assumed that love is just another word for obedience. My thinking was, as long as I am doing what God wants me to do, I am loving Him.

That's how always I used to read Matthew 10:37, where Jesus says:

*"Anyone who loves his father or mother
more than me is not worthy of me; anyone
who loves his son or daughter more than me is
not worthy of me...."*

The paragraph in which that sentence is found is on theme of responding to persecution. Jesus is telling His disciples that they are going to be violently opposed, even by their closest relations. And He's telling them that they must remain loyal to Him even if it costs them their life. So this is the

way I used to read Matthew 10:37: *"Unless you choose to be loyal to Me rather than to those you feel the most love for, you're not worthy of me."*

But then I made a shocking discovery: the word Jesus uses for "love" in this verse is not *agape*—it's *philea*. And *philea* is a word that stresses the emotional element of love. In fact, it can be translated "affection." So Jesus is not saying that He wants me to be more loyal to Him than to those I feel the most love for; He is saying that He wants to be the one that I feel the most love for. He wants loyalty that is fueled by love. He wants first place in my heart. And if He is not my first love, I am not worthy of Him.

The apostle Paul says essentially the same thing in 1 Corinthians 16:22:

"If anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him."

Paul uses the same word for love—*philea*. He pronounces a curse on whoever does not have the kind of affection for Jesus that they would have for a close friend.

God uses even more intimate imagery in Jeremiah 2. To a nation that has forsaken its first love, He says:

*"I remember the devotion of your youth, how
as a bride you loved me...."*

—Jeremiah 2:2

The picture that God uses to illustrate the kind of relationship He wants to have with me is of a couple on their honeymoon. I am part of the Bride of Christ, and He wants me to love Him as intensely as a bride loves her groom on their wedding day. But I had to admit that the spark was gone in my relationship with Him. It was more like the marriage described in the duet by Neil Diamond and Barbara Streisand:

*You don't bring me flowers
You don't sing me love songs
You hardly talk to me anymore
When I come through the door
at the end of the day*

*I remember when
You couldn't wait to love me
Used to hate to leave me
Now after lovin' me late at night
Well it's good for you babe
You're feelin' alright
Well you just roll over
and turn out the light
And you don't bring
me flowers anymore*

Who wants a marriage like that? Not Jesus. He wants His bride to love Him as passionately and as intensely as He loves her.

ON THAT SUNDAY AFTERNOON, GOD USED A broken down house to gently reveal to me a very painful truth—I had lost my first love.

And that realization drove me to Revelation 2—because I had read it enough times in the past to know that Jesus not only diagnoses the Ephesians’ problem; He also gives them a prescription. He tells them how to put the spark back in their spiritual lives.

“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.”

—Revelation 2:5

There are three things we must do if we must do if we want to experience a second honeymoon with the Lord.

- **REMEMBER.** *Remember the height from which you have fallen!* In other words, re-live the past in your imagination. Paint a picture in your mind of what your relationship with Jesus was like when your love for Him was at its peak. Stare at that picture until it stirs up in you the same feelings you felt back then. Reminisce until your appetite for Jesus becomes insatiable.
- **REPENT.** To *repent* means to make a U-turn. It means to come the point where we say, “Enough! I am not going to keep drifting. I refuse to settle for a stale relationship with Jesus. I will do whatever it takes to get the passion back.” Until we get fed up with going through the motions, nothing is going to change. Change begins when we say no to whatever we have to say no to in order to make intimacy with Jesus Christ our singular ambition.
- **RE-DO.** ...*Do the things you did at first.* Re-do whatever you did when your love for Jesus was at its zenith—because the love you felt for Him then was not a fluke; it was a predictable result of the choices you made and the habits you formed. Jesus tells us that if we want to feel what we used to feel, we must do what we used to do—because it’s not feelings that change actions; it’s actions that change

feelings. If we wait to feel love for Jesus before we do the things that people who love Him do, we’ll be waiting the rest of our lives.

So the question I had to wrestle with was: *What did I do when I was a new Christian that I am not doing now?*

At the top of my list is unhurried quiet times. When Jesus was my first love, I was never in a hurry to get done with my devotions. I read the Scriptures slowly and thoughtfully, I prayed as if I was having an intimate conversation rather than working through a list, and I journaled. I used different colored pens and I drew pictures. I look back now and I see that I was fully engaged.

I can also remember my commitment to praying with other Christians. I remember going to prayer meetings, not because there was some urgent problem but just because I enjoyed praying with my friends. I would sit on the floor of a crowded living room for two hours straight and sing and pray to the Lord I loved so deeply.

Something else that did in those early days was to share my faith aggressively. I didn’t tell the Lord I was willing to talk to someone about my faith if they brought the subject up. I brought the subject up—with friends and family members and complete strangers. I loved Jesus too much to keep Him to myself.

I also remember how willing I was to take risks in serving Jesus. I carried boxes of Bibles through communist countries, I prayed for miraculous healings, I gave speeches in college classes about Jesus. I said “Yes” to almost anything anybody challenged me to do for Christ.

No wonder I loved Him so much! My life was filled with activities that fanned my love for Him into flame.

I DON’T EXPECT MY LIST TO BE YOUR LIST.

Every relationship is unique. What did you do when your relationship with Jesus Christ was most satisfying? Do what you used to do, and you will feel what you used to feel.

When my wife Robin and I were first married, we thought we would always be newlyweds. We fully expected to be as passionately in love on our 50th anniversary

as the day we were married. But that was three kids and mortgage ago. Somehow just the busyness of life has robbed us of the romance we used to enjoy. But not too long ago we celebrated our 10th anniversary. It was an anniversary that we used to dream we would celebrate in Paris. But that was a little beyond our budget, so instead we planned a getaway to the Hotel Parisi in a resort city near our home. And I tried to make it as much like Paris as I could. I bought Robin several different cards, all with different pictures of the Eiffel Tower. I bought a CD of French music. I took her to the best French restaurant in town. I worked hard at romancing my wife—and that weekend I felt more in love with her than I had felt in a long time. Why? Because we did things that lovers do. We felt what we used to feel, because we did what we used to do.

That same dynamic applies to our relationship with Jesus. If you can relate to my experience, and you are serious about rekindling your passion for the Lord, can I encourage you to do what I did? Carve out an unhurried chunk of time in which you can work through the process outlined in Revelation 2:4. Remember how your relationship with Jesus used to be. Repent of whatever it is that keeps you from loving Jesus wholeheartedly. Craft an action plan

consisting of the habits you had when your love for the Lord was at its apex. Get alone with Jesus, and don't leave His presence until you have a concrete plan for rekindling your passion for Him.

FOR ABOUT TWO MONTHS AFTER MY EYE-opening trip to my childhood home, I worked through this process. And slowly—ever so slowly—I felt my passion for the Lord return. I began to love Him as I did when He first gave me new life. And then one day, I was again driving through my hometown, alone this time, and I decided to take one more look at my old house. And what I saw caused me to weep. The house had been refurbished. The trash was gone. There was a fresh coat of paint on the stucco, new singles on the roof, and freshly varnished hardwood floors where the orange shag carpeting used to be. The house still looked old and a little beaten up (just like me). But there was new life there—just as there was in my heart.

How patient the Lord is! How long He waits for us to return to our first love, and how graciously He welcomes us back. I don't know the condition of your heart, but I do know this: If you will remember the height from which you have fallen, and if you will repent and do the things you did at first, God will repair what is broken and there will be a fire in the fireplace once again. ■