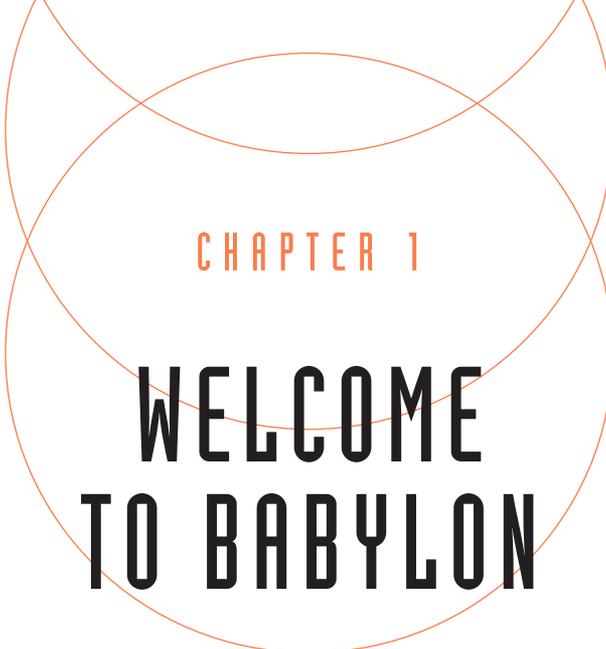


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## CHAPTER 1

# WELCOME TO BABYLON

### *We Have Arrived, and We Are Here to Stay*

**T**he church in Babylon!

Those four words plunge us into the heart of our present cultural context here in the West. We are called to be the church in the midst of rampant idolatry, violence, false religions, and willful spiritual blindness. We live in a sexualized culture bent on defiance of biblical authority.

Why another book about the church?

Many excellent books have been written about the church, about its ministries, methodologies, and challenges of the future. You, as a reader, might well ask: Why should another book be written on the topic? What will be said here that has not been said by others, perhaps more eloquently?

This is not a book about methods or better ways to spread

the gospel. This book does not address the question of how to plan more effective worship services or to streamline the leadership of a church staff. My heart lies elsewhere.

Let me explain.

## JESUS AND HIS CHURCH

Whenever I think of the church, my mind gravitates to the introduction John gave to the seven churches of Revelation. Jesus is seen walking among the seven lampstands, and He is

*clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. . . . In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. . . . As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

(REV. 1:13-16, 20)

Visualize it. First, John says Jesus was walking between the seven lampstands (the seven churches), and then John says Jesus was *holding* seven stars in His right hand (the angels or “messengers” of the seven churches). Jesus both *observes* the churches as He walks between them and also *holds* the leadership of the churches in His right hand. He loves His people whom He died to redeem. He observes us, and like these seven churches, He commends us for our faithfulness. I agree

with John Stott, who said that the church needs to have its blinders taken off to see Jesus as He is! If only!

Jesus loves His people whom He died to redeem. He observes us, and like the seven churches of Revelation, He commends us for what pleases Him and rebukes us for our failures, but always with a marvelous promise of reward given to the overcomers. And thus seven times He admonishes, “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Here’s my premise. Jesus loves His people and carries them in His right hand. *He who has been given all authority in heaven and earth has made available to us all that we need, not merely to survive but to thrive in this hour of growing darkness.*

We will not go into the future unprepared—if we are willing to hear “what the Spirit says to the churches.” Salvation is free, but as the seven churches of Revelation discovered, there is a cost to living authentic lives of holiness in a godless culture. We cannot take the resources Christ offers for granted but must diligently seek Him and His Word with prayerful wisdom.

### ***The Faithful Remnant***

We can be grateful that there are still many pastors who faithfully teach the Scriptures and have not compromised their convictions. Ministries such as The Gospel Coalition draw thousands of pastors to their conferences; I’m sure that the majority of these pastors are being true to the faith and are preaching the gospel and its implications. Much more could be said about the many who are faithful, in both big churches and small ones. As Francis Schaeffer used to say,

“There are no little people and no big people in the true spiritual sense, but only consecrated and unconsecrated people.”<sup>1</sup>

It is fashionable today to condemn the church for its many failings. Some will disagree with me, but I don’t believe that the disintegration of the United States is entirely the fault of the church. Certainly, the church has not done all that it should; certainly, we have contributed to the moral and spiritual bankruptcy we see around us. But there are many streams that have contributed to the climate of anti-Christian bigotry and the conscious rejection of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

Assuredly, I will be critical of the church’s lack of faithfulness, but I believe there are certain inevitabilities in history and in the purposes of God that even a vibrant church

cannot change. That is why Jesus used the little word *must* so often! To give but one example,

“And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things *must* first take place, but the end will not be at once” (Luke 21:9; see also passages such as Matt. 16:21; 24:6; 26:54). Certain things *must* come to pass.

But—and this is critical—Jesus and His followers believed that spiritual and moral darkness was no obstacle to God; His will would be achieved not just in good times, but also in bad times when the church was most sorely oppressed.

So, the inevitability of certain events should never make us collapse into fatalism, but rather give us the comfort of knowing that history is, after all, in the hands of God. God

Sometimes God’s light is most clearly seen in times of darkness.

has a purpose for the church that will come to pass; He loves His people and wants us to be a light no matter the cultural currents, no matter the opposition, and no matter the consequences. Sometimes God's light is most clearly seen in times of darkness. *In every era, that light is the gift of His presence in and among His people.*

In these pages, we will be surprised at God's patience, but also His willingness to judge a nation that turns away from the truth it was given. We will also rediscover the lengths God is willing to go to remain faithful to His people, whether to ancient Israel or the bride of Christ so beautifully described in the New Testament.

## OLD TESTAMENT BABYLON/NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

We must be careful when we turn to the Old Testament for instructions for the New Testament church. I wince when I hear someone applying God's dealings with Israel to the New Testament church without giving thought to the fact that we are in a radically different era, when many of the Old Testament practices simply do not apply. For example, when Elijah won the contest with the prophets of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel, he summarily took 450 false prophets and had them killed at the river Kishon. As we shall see later in this book, the New Testament warns against false prophets and teachers, but we certainly are not expected to have them slaughtered! They are free to buy time on television, build their churches, and promote their heresies. The best we can do is expose them and help our flocks realize their danger. We no longer stone people for adultery, homosexuality, or

disobeying one's parents. We are in a different age with different relationships and expectations.

However, we do have a convincing Old Testament parallel for what we face today, and that is Israel's experience of being refugees in Babylon (strictly speaking, it was *Judah* in Babylon). Here God's people had to live as a minority in the midst of a majority pagan culture. The Jewish consensus with its laws and temple worship was gone. Tragically, Solomon's beautiful temple was totally destroyed, left in a heap of ruins.

The Jews had to survive among pagan idolaters who had no regard for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Ten thousand Jews trekked about eight hundred miles over a period of weeks and months to arrive at a strange country with a strange language. All the social, religious, and cultural supports they'd been accustomed to were gone. Their tears of regret could not restore their previous privileges, which now were only a memory.

## BABYLON IS NOW

Mention the name *Babylon* and many images come to mind. We might think of occultism, immorality, and violence—an apt description of our own culture. But more often, what comes to mind is the word *idolatry*. The Tower of Babel was built to oppose God's explicit command to populate the whole earth. Instead, the people settled down in one place and chose to build a tower to reach heaven. Their intention was to worship the stars rather than God and serve their own lusts rather than obey God's instructions.

The name *Babylon* occurs about two hundred times in Scrip-

ture. Mostly, we read about the Babylon of the past, but in the book of Revelation, we have both a description and a prediction of the fall of a future Babylon (see Rev. 18). When Jeremiah the prophet was preaching and writing, ancient Babylon had long since passed off the scene as a world power, but now a new Babylonian Empire had emerged. This revived neo-Babylonian Empire had recently overtaken Assyria and was at its peak as a world power. And Jeremiah, God bless him, would actually live to see these Babylonians destroy the city of Jerusalem, enslave the citizens of Judah, and leave Solomon's temple in ruins. He would weep until he could weep no more.

The rebellion of Babylon has carried on throughout history. The people of those days sacrificed their children to pagan gods; we sacrifice our unborn children on the altar of convenience. We do not bow down before stone idols; we give wholehearted allegiance to the gods of money, power, and sex. Too often our devotion to God is an "add on," something done in church once a week.

Christians are a minority in an increasingly hostile culture. We are exiles, not geographically, but morally and spiritually. "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:11–12).

Exiles face opposition; they are misunderstood and are tempted to lose their distinctiveness. And, as those who belong to Christ, we are called to spread the good news and yet avoid being ensnared by the passions of the flesh and the

many seductions of the world. Thankfully Jesus, at the right hand of God, prays for us that we might be in the world but not of it (see John 17:14–16).

Jeremiah, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, not only helps us analyze our own cultural context but also gives us fresh insight into the nature of God—His meticulous justice and His mercy along with His intense hatred for sin. In the book of Jeremiah, we are also led into the mysteries of God and His sovereignty even over the hearts of those who hate Him.

Best of all, we see God’s faithfulness to His people while they are living in the midst of a pagan nation that worshiped the gods of their culture, the gods of their own making, and the gods of their sexual preference. If the book of Jeremiah is a book of *judgment*, it is also a book of *hope*—the kind of hope we need when we are confronted with the complexities and hostilities of our culture today.

### *Jeremiah’s Difficult Assignment*

Jeremiah prophesied at a time when the Word of God was neglected and even ridiculed. A few decades earlier, under the reign of Josiah, the Book of the Law was found; it was buried beneath the clutter of trash within the temple. There were so many other gods in the sanctuary that only as the rubble was being cleared away, God’s Book was found.

When the leaders read it, a revival broke out, but it was too little too late. Some repented, but the nation as a whole was unmoved. The hopes of the godly were short-lived. There was some light, but not enough to overtake the darkness.

Jeremiah lived in a day of deaf ears. He was the weeping prophet, but the people around him remained dry eyed. He

always told the truth but no one believed him. His ministry was so hated that he was thrown into a pit. In his discouragement he lamented:

*O LORD, you have deceived me,  
and I was deceived;  
you are stronger than I,  
and you have prevailed.  
I have become a laughingstock all the day;  
everyone mocks me.  
For whenever I speak, I cry out,  
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"  
For the word of the LORD has become for me  
a reproach and derision all day long.*

(JER. 20:7-8)

*God, you have deceived me!* Jeremiah expected that God would give him a word of peace, but he only received a word of judgment. As Jeremiah spilled out his heart to the people, he was rewarded with slander, mockery, and condemnation by false prophets. As the nation began to crumble, the king called for him but had no intention of listening to what this prophet had to say. *The nation was deaf to God's warnings.*

Our nation will be more stringently judged than Judah. The people of Jeremiah's day had only a few copies of the law, and only a few people could read while others relied on what they were told. Contrast that with us. We have more translations of the Bible than we can count; we have the Bible on our iPads and smartphones. We are almost universally literate; and if we don't care to read, we can have the Bible read to us by accessing any number of electronic devices and programs.

The nation had drifted so far from God that He told Jeremiah to stop praying for the nation (Jer. 7:16). Judah had crossed the point of no return. Whether the United States is at that point, we cannot be sure. But our slide toward moral and spiritual rebellion is accelerating with each passing day. What a wonderful opportunity for the church to display both the power of God to keep us and the love of God to authenticate us.

### *A Sexualized Culture*

Later in this book we will discuss more specifically the idolatry of sexuality in our culture, but for now we answer a question: Why were pagan idols so attractive to the people of Israel and Judah? Why did the people constantly flirt with other gods?

Study history and you will discover that idolatry justified and encouraged sexual permissiveness of every sort. Shrines were built on every high hill, and God said, “Under every green tree you bowed down like a whore” (Jer. 2:20). Prostitution, homosexuality, and every form of perversion was practiced, and the people loved it. Orgies were common, and the false gods stood by in silent approval.

God was displeased. “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:12–13). The water they thirsted for proved to be bitter, guilt-inducing, and destructively addictive. It promised freedom but brought bondage, broken relationships, and endless pain.

People were gagging on the guilt, shame, and brokenness that their idols brought. But they refused to turn away from what was destroying them. The nature of evil is to plunge ahead, deliberately closing one's eyes to the consequences. Or even worse, seeing the consequences but being so addicted to behavioral patterns that change seems impossible.

Think America. Our nation is drinking from similar poisoned wells. Like salt water that promises to satisfy but only increases a deadly thirst, so our nation plunges into a sexual wasteland that drives people to emptiness and despair. All of this has to be mentally justified no matter what our consciences tell us. The bumper stickers used to say, "If it feels good, do it." Now the bumper sticker should say, "If it feels good, *believe* it."

The people had their own home remedies for their emptiness and guilt. "Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God" (Jer. 2:22). Using rationalizations as detergent, they were trying in vain to cleanse their consciences. But their self-made attempts to manage their emptiness only enflamed their desires. They looked everywhere for a remedy. Everywhere except to God.

The people didn't wait for sin to come to them, they went looking for it. "How can you say, 'I am not unclean, I have not gone after the Baals'? Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done—a restless young camel running here and there, a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust?" (Jer. 2:23–24).

God said that the day was coming when the people would feel shame, but for now, they could not blush. "As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed:

they, their kings” (Jer. 2:26). There was a time when unmarried couples living together would try to hide that fact, but not anymore. They openly say that they are living together and have no sense of shame. “Times are a changing.”

It has been said, once we open the door to sin, it takes us further than we intended to go, keeps us longer than we intended to stay, and costs us more than we intended to pay.

With their conscience deadened by unrestrained sexuality, the people of Judah ended up sacrificing their children to the god Molech. In the United States, we are sacrificing our unborn on the altar of sexual freedom, and now with one-third of America’s children born out of wedlock, they are thrown into a world of insecurity, anger, and too often, abuse. Sadly, this vicious cycle is often repeated in the next generation.

Every god demands increasing allegiance. Whether it’s money or fame or sex, our god of choice is not easily satisfied. John Calvin, the great theologian, said that the human mind is an idol factory. The human heart keeps generating one idol after another.

What a marvelous opportunity for God to show up through His church!

### *False Prophets Aplenty*

Jeremiah found himself at sharp odds with the false prophets of his day who had a more welcome message for the people. The populace knew that they didn’t like Jeremiah or his message and longed for something more acceptable.

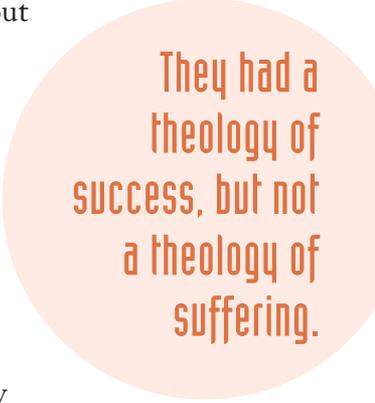
The false prophets said, in effect, “We have a better message; we don’t like the negativity of Jeremiah; we are presenting a positive message that people will accept.” They

knew that as long as Jeremiah spoke about judgment, his crowds would be small. The wider populace was eager for a different message, a more hopeful word. That's why Jeremiah was thrown into a pit.

The false prophets did what false prophets almost always do: *they appealed to the ego of their listeners by telling them that God owes them special blessings because they are the people of God.* They preached blessings without repentance, prosperity without piety. They had a theology of success, but not a theology of suffering. They preached about the good life in this present world and gave no thought to the world to come.

This was their argument: “Sure we serve other gods, but we also continue to worship Jehovah, and so we are sons and daughters of the Most High God. There is no way that He would let us be humiliated at the hands of the Babylonians, a people far more wicked than we.” Their message was one of peace and continued prosperity, but it was like putting a bandage over a cancerous tumor. In short, their message was: we must learn to live like a King's kid.

God was not pleased. “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown” (Jer. 6:14–15). Yes, these false prophets healed the wounds of the people far



They had a  
theology of  
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a theology of  
suffering.

too lightly! It was all about *how to live your best life right then!*

Jeremiah wept, but they didn't. They were prophets of hope, a false hope to be sure, but it was hope. God said, "They [the false prophets] have spoken falsely of the LORD and have said, 'He will do nothing; no disaster will come upon us, nor shall we see sword or famine'" (Jer. 5:12). Just blessing upon blessing!

Jeremiah rejected the false prophets' one-sided emphasis that God had chosen the nation and therefore they could presume on His unending favor despite their lifestyle. "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?" (Jer. 5:30–31).

In our day, too many are preaching a gospel that does not humble anyone. Instead, it's presented as a means of self-exaltation and fulfillment. We are awash with so-called "evangelists" who tell us that if we send them "seed money," this act will break curses, we will inherit wealth, and we will be healed from all of our physical ailments. Just send them money, and God will open the windows of heaven and give a bountiful harvest of financial and physical blessing.

These same false prophets claim to have special revelations from God. This is exactly what the false prophets were doing in Jeremiah's day. "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds" (Jer. 14:14 NIV).

*Delusions of their own minds!*

The people loved what they were hearing. They were as-

sured that there would be neither war nor famine, only prosperity. We can almost hear them say, “Let’s not let the devil rob us of what is rightfully ours. We belong to Jehovah, the God of the universe, let us live accordingly!”

God says, “I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, ‘I had a dream! I had a dream!’ How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds?” (Jer. 23:25–26 NIV). No wonder the Lord says, “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes” (Jer. 23:16).

*False hopes!*

Let us hear Jeremiah speak on behalf of God: “They have spoken falsely of the Lord and have said, ‘He will do nothing; no disaster will come upon us, nor shall we see sword or famine. *The prophets will become wind; the word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them!*’” (Jer. 5:12–13).

*The prophets will become wind!*

Paul knew that we in our day would encounter the same deceivers. “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds” (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

My heart breaks for people who are deceived by false prophets. Often the poor are susceptible because they are saying to themselves, “If I just had enough faith, if I had the same faith as this guru or this prophet, then I would be able to drive the same car that he drives and wear the clothes that

he wears.” These dear people send in their meager funds and never see the windfall they have been promised.

Jeremiah teaches us that false prophets must be exposed for what they are.

## CALLED TO OBEDIENCE, NOT SUCCESS

God was pleased with Jeremiah, not because he was successful but because he was faithful. And as God prepared Jeremiah for his role, so God has also prepared us. “Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’” (Jer. 1:4–5). Please notice that Jeremiah was not called *while* in his mother’s womb, but *before* he was formed in his mother’s womb. The timing of his birth and calling were in God’s heart long before the prophet arrived on the scene. In fact, God had planned both Jeremiah’s birth and mission in eternity past.

The clearer we hear our call from God, the more courage we will have to face spiritual battles.

And He has the same plans for us. We might not have exactly the same calling as Jeremiah, but God did know us before we were born. We are also called to be alive and represent Him at this hour of our history. We could have been born in a previous era, a future era, or not born at all. God has a reason for us living *now*. Jesus said to His disciples, and thus to us, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit” (John

15:16). *The clearer we hear our call from God, the more courage we will have to face uphill spiritual battles.*

Jeremiah did not see the revival for which he had prayed and worked. His urgent call to return back to God was received by a few, not the masses. In our day, there are thousands of us who pray for a nationwide revival. We have not yet seen it, but perhaps we shall yet see the fulfillment of our prayers. Perhaps not. Either way, we are called to faithfulness. This book is about what we should be doing even as we wait and pray for a revival. Faithfulness to our calling should be our overriding passion.

The God who calls is the God who provides. God gave Jeremiah all the gifts and strength he needed to face the opposition of his culture, and our heavenly Father does the same for us. Young or old, married, single, or widowed, God has equipped us to live for Him in this hour. As we shall see, we are to live without fear and with joy at the privilege of representing Christ even at great personal cost.

Read about how God prequalified Jeremiah for his role.

*“But you, dress yourself for work; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the LORD.”*

(JER. 1:17–19)

When did God make Jeremiah a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls? This was not a prediction; it was a present reality. Jeremiah was prequalified to walk in victory, to withstand the opposition, and to fulfill his assignment. Like Isaiah, he could not point to a list of successes, but nonetheless, he died faithful to his calling.

Jeremiah's God will walk with us and will be faithful to His promises; He will stand with us during dark times. We are not expected to generate our own light and shine it into the darkness; the moon does not need to generate its own light but only reflect it.

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The title of this book is *The Church in Babylon*, but the subtitle is *Heeding the Call to Be a Light in the Darkness*. We want to be strong, courageous, and gracious, but also uncompromising as witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ in a culture that is becoming increasingly hostile to the Christian faith. Like Israel in Babylon, *our challenge is to impact the culture without being spiritually destroyed by it*.

In brief, the purpose of this book is to answer three questions:

First, what does faithfulness look like in a nation that has lost its way, a nation that appears to be under the judgment of God?

Second, what are those issues that we, as a church, must confront in order to represent the God we worship? Or

to put it differently, what instructions might Christ give us as we prepare ourselves for the darkness that is closing around us and the deeper darkness that's on its way?

Finally, Jesus told five of the seven churches of Revelation to repent. Might that not be His message to us? What might He be asking us to repent of? Where might we have lost our way?

I believe that the time is coming, and is already here, when the church will not be able to depend on the media, the courts, our universities, or even some so-called evangelical churches to stand with us as the onslaught against Christianity comes to us from every direction. We have to learn how to conduct ourselves as a minority in a majority post-Christian world. We have to know how to engage the culture without becoming contaminated by it.

We have to know  
how to engage  
the culture  
without becoming  
contaminated by it.

God's passionate invitation to Judah is given to us today.

*“Return, faithless Israel,  
declares the LORD.  
I will not look on you in anger,  
for I am merciful,  
declares the LORD;  
I will not be angry forever.  
Only acknowledge your guilt,  
that you rebelled against the LORD your God*

*and scattered your favors among foreigners under every  
green tree,  
and that you have not obeyed my voice,  
declares the LORD.  
Return, O faithless children,  
declares the LORD;  
for I am your master.”*

(JER. 3:12-14)

To the church in Ephesus that had lost its first love, He warned, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5). Visit Ephesus today and you will discover that its lampstand was removed many centuries ago.

As Leonard Ravenhill once said, “The church is waiting for the world to become regenerate, while the world is waiting for the church to become repentant.”<sup>2</sup>

A repentant and humble church need not fear the future. Jesus, who walks among us and holds us in His right hand, can empower us to “be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15). Only pride and self-righteousness will prevent us from fulfilling our calling.

As mentioned, our light is as borrowed as is the light of the moon. Only the Light of the World is able to keep our own lights burning in an age that tells us we must snuff them out.

I have read that when Augustine was told about the fall of Rome to the Vandals, he felt deep sadness because he loved

that city. He also believed its demise was a judgment for its sins, lamenting, “Whatever men build, men will destroy. Let’s get on with building the kingdom of God.”

Yes, whatever men build, men will destroy, so let us get on with building the church that is highly prized by God and empowered by the Savior who gave His life for it.

*“ . . . on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*

(MATT. 16:18)

What seems impossible with men is possible with God.