

# Ephesus: Duty and Devotion

Revelation 2:1-7

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Reporting for the New Roman Times: There has been a recent resurgence in patriotic devotion in our eastern regions. It appears that a new fervor for the emperor and his empire's importance is gripping the coast of Asia. There have been great assemblies and parades combining the local religions with the power of the Caesar. We have reports of a great movement to isolate, remove and condemn the dissenting factions in the region. Many have been arrested, some executed, others exiled to eliminate the potential of revolt. The effect is that those who fail to recognize the glory of Rome are now invisible. We have credible witnesses that indicate many have abdicated their former divisive beliefs or at least have squelched their fervor in practice. The great city of Ephesus is one of the principle urban areas that is making great strides in uniting their devotion to Artemis and their local cults with Roman splendor...

When John was receiving this vivid and complex revelation from exile, the church at Ephesus was about 40 years old. Paul had taught there for 3 years. The Apostle John and Timothy had ministered in its midst. This church and its elders were the reason for a chapter in Luke's Acts. They were the recipients of a letter from Paul and likely a couple from John as well. They were well taught and knew what they were taught well.

We need to read each of these seven letters like we read the rest of the Bible, careful to see their individual settings, and yet to see them as part of the larger flow of the book of Revelation. Since John is told that these are the things to come, then each individual "letter" should be read more as a part of John's entire revelation rather than merely an independent correspondence to a church like Paul's letters. Each then is timeless in its insight into the way churches are and will be.

In these letter-like sections we see the Lord of the church moving among His people to encourage them in their strengths, to expose them in their weaknesses and to explain to them what recovery as a church will mean and what victory as the church will accomplish. Since "right now" is included in John's "things to come", each should be read with the question, "How am I (or we) like these people?" And then follow that with, "Where can I (or we) repent, change and grow in order to overcome as well?" We begin with the address to the church at Ephesus in John's Revelation chapter two verses one to seven.

## **Illumined Ruler (v.1)**

The opening sentence in each address is intended to recall what was introduced in chapter one about Jesus himself. John is being given a “revealing” of what God is continuing to do through the work of Jesus Christ. We open with a description of an illumined ruler holding stars, walking among lampstands. Read with me in verse one of chapter two.

*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:  
‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand,  
who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

### **He speaks...**

First of all we see he speaks, he gives his words to the angel. The idea of “angel” to whom he speaks is complicated with many competing ideas. Nearly all references elsewhere in John’s Revelation the word refers to a spiritual being. I think there is an intention for us to see a spiritual world that lies behind what is visible to Ephesus and to us now. By referring and addressing the “angel” is to cause us to see this as deeper than a mere letter addressing a problems in local churches. These are cosmic, universal, spiritual conflicts that have ultimate consequences.

### **He holds...**

We saw in chapter one that the “stars” were an image of these angels of the churches. So, what does it mean that these stars are held in God’s right hand? Throughout the Bible it is God’s right hand that saves and upholds us, provides safety and satisfaction. God’s right hand then is a place of security and prominence. Using this image, Jesus is holding secure his people who are important to him. He is not loosing his grip as the images of the book unfold. His “stars” are gripped.

### **He walks...**

He is also described as walking among the lampstands. Again in chapter one, we were clued in on the image of these seven lamps as representing these churches. Likely, the reference to “seven” to both the angels and the lamp stands serves to represent completion and should cause us to think of these as representing churches everywhere throughout all time. These churches and then these letters were to be thought of and read in a much broader context, setting the tone for the rest of the book. It is these kinds of churches that will be involved in the events yet to be presented. But by noting the Jesus is walking among the lamps the emphasis is on the Christ being in the very midst of His churches. He is present and aware. He is still Emmanuel, God with us.

## **Intensive Review (v.2-4)**

So we should care about what he has to say. It should be very important to us. He is the Lord who holds his people secure and even walks with them. For us, his should be the only evaluation that really matters, an evaluation from Christ himself. Jesus is portrayed as being intimately involved and therefore can provide a faithful, intensive review. We have all had assessments by employers, supervisors or teachers that we feel are unfair and incomplete. But this evaluation, being from the Word himself, is spot on, exacting and true. Read with me verses two through four.

*I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance,  
and how you cannot bear with those who are evil,  
but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not,  
and found them to be false.  
I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake,  
and you have not grown weary.*

*But I have this against you,  
that you have abandoned the love you had at first.*

### **He reviews their...work...**

Jesus states that he knows their work, described as “toil” and “patient endurance.” He is fully aware of not only what they are doing but why and how. He then elaborates on what He sees and knows so that the church at Ephesus will be painfully aware of where they stand in the face of their redeemer.

### **He reviews their...judgment...**

He first of all commends them for their judgment. They care deeply for the truth and test or examine those who would claim to be apostles to discern whether what they say and teach is in accordance with the truth. This means they know truth well, they have been well taught. They have been warned about false teachers and for such wolves, antichrists and “liars” knowing their end result will lead to “evil.”

### **He reviews their...endurance...**

Then he again recognizes their patience and endurance in withstanding these trials and the onslaught of heresy. They carry out their work with a sense of duty and diligence. They have not begun to grumble but continue to faithfully defend the faith, knowing it is the name, the reputation of their Lord they are upholding. They knew, loved and defended doctrinal truth with every fiber of their beings. Pastor Russ in

a previous sermon used this summary of the church at Ephesus with these well-crafted words:

“What would this church look like? It would be:

*A serving church* - A church that God commends is one who *works*. It must be serving. A church that is not working has not understood what faith is really about. Sadly, too many see church as a spectator sport.

*A sacrificial church* - The word *toil* points to labor until exhaustion. It means that we are willing to pour out our lives for God in His kingdom.

*A steadfast church* - When trials came, they held true to the course. They were a church marked by enduring and patient labor over the long haul toward greater ends.

*A separated church* - They did not tolerate false doctrine and false deeds. They tested the claims to truth and authority for themselves. They understood that error is dangerous and deadly to the soul.

*A suffering church* - They patiently bore their burdens and toiled without fainting. They, like us, may not have yet had persecution, but they had plenty of opposition and pressure.”

### ***He reviews their...love***

Wouldn't it be great if Clearcreek Chapel would have such a review, known to Christ for our doctrine, our duty, and our discipline? However, the next sentence begins with “but”. But? What could God possibly have against so faithful and hard working church? Jesus says that they have abandoned their “first love.” He knows they are working hard but he also knows all of their motivations. This is one they are lacking. And as we will see, it is a big one. This “first love” idea is foundational to their very existence, their very relationship to the Lord of the churches. So what is really going on here in this terrible indictment? What does it mean to lose this “first love?”

It may refer to their love for God when they first came to Him. Perhaps they have failed to maintain, grow and mature of their love, its excitement and commitment. Or, it may refer to the first place love ought to have occupied in their hearts and minds. Or, it may refer to their love for others, either within the community or without. It may be they have ceased to share the gospel with unbelievers with the same fervency that they once did. It may be that their engagement with one another is now perfunctory, dutiful but dry.

Or, it may be all three. Our love for one another and for the lost is generated by the importance and quality of our love for God himself. Savoring Christ will be seen in the care we have for others. That is why our mission statement here at Clearcreek Chapel reads as it does:

*“By God’s grace and through His Word, we will cultivate in the hearts of God’s people a passion for the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ magnified in love for Him, manifested in love for one another and multiplied by love for the lost.”*

### **Intended Response (v.5,6)**

But this accusation is intended as a warning. There is an intended response. There is something they should do about their state of affairs. In these next verses is a summary for their recovery. Its very simplicity should astound us. Let’s continue reading, now from verses five and six.

*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.*

*Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

### **Remember...**

The first step is perhaps one of the most, if not the most important. The Ephesian congregation was called to remember. They had to look back and recognize how far they had fallen. This required them to contemplate where they had been and what it was like. Self-reflection is never easy and our memories are often clouded over with the layers of thickened, crusty paint of self-deceit. They were challenged to think back to their beginnings.

### **Repent...**

But not only remember, they were called to repent. The word simply means to change or to turn. It is a change of thinking, change of behavior and in this case a change that requires loving. In essence, a change in their entire inner being. They were to again think about Him, talk to Him, read His Word and then live in love. Pastor Russ has put it this way, “Faith (seeing with our understanding the reality of Biblical truth and God’s promises) works (labors with hard toil and long discipline) by love (giving myself by submitting and sacrificing).

### **Return...**

But what were they to return to? This depends a bit on what you think this first love is. But if it involves a devotional and devoted commitment to Christ manifested in love for one another and others then this will require a more fervent Bible reading, praying, and serving that reflects on devotion.

### **Remove...**

This is a sobering thought. They were under threat to lose God's blessing and their church dismantled. What a warning: no repentance, no position. How terrible it would be to have been commended for doctrine and duty and yet be utter and absolute failures. To have the lamp removed is to cease to exist as a gathering of God's people. There is no middle ground, no half-loving here. But this warning includes a glimmer of hope that all is not lost, they can repent and return. He does finish with a commendation, perhaps a hint that he expects them to do well. They hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans. As for these Nicolaitans, we do not know much about them, but for know just know that they were a problem and that they show up in a later address.

### **Illustrative Request (v.7)**

But this address finishes with an inclusive and illustrative request. Let us go on and read verse seven.

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

*To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life,  
which is in the paradise of God.'*

### **Hear...**

This is an interesting challenge. It is not only the Ephesians that are called to hear, rather it is the rest of the readers as well. This is the generalizing application to this address to the Ephesian believers. This is why we know this message is intended to be timeless and universally applicable to all believers.

### **The promise of hope...**

And it concludes with a promise, a promise of hope. These conquerors, in other translations, these overcomers, are not a special class of believer. Christ has won the victory that we partake of "in Him." The promise is the delight and intimacy that believers will have with Christ. Conquerors will partake of life in the glorious presence of God.

### **To the one...**

And this promise is directed to individuals, "the one." Yes, we often emphasize the collective character of the imperatives but the church's labor is always done at the individual level. It is people who labor. It is people who forsake their love for Christ. It is people who remember, repent and return.

## **Reflect and Respond**

So, look around and look "inside". We are all right aren't we? Aren't Clearcreek Chapel and each of its members functioning in a serving, sacrificing, steadfast, separated and suffering church? Shouldn't we be commended for our commitment to doctrine, our faithfulness in our duties, our consistency in our discipline, and our patient endurance in difficulty?

But could we have forsaken our first love? Could we have duty without devotion? So what should we do?

We should still make every effort to know and honor the Alpha and Omega, the one who walks in the midst of the candlesticks, Jesus Christ our Lord. We should care deeply about knowing the Father's character and plan of redemption. We should be vigilant in our guard against a false reading of His plan. We should care to know deeply the ways in which the Spirit calls us to repent, to change and then live as the new creation he has made us.

In light of the direction that John's Revelation is taking us, we should live our lives with an "eschatological" perspective. We should understand that our heavenly citizenship, our participation in the eternal kingdom has begun now and that we should look to its consummation and fullness. Our heads should be up, looking to Jesus who has pioneered our faith to direct and comfort us. In the middle of the very pressing troubles and trials of our lives, even in the inconveniences of a pandemic, may we gain strength and calm, grace and peace from the greatness of God and the glory of Christ. Many will remember my illustration from my driver's education class's filmstrip telling us to "aim high in steering." We need to lift our heads and "aim high in living." Jesus wins!

And we should make every effort to look back, to remember what it is to love Jesus. In fact we should make every effort to love Him more. We need to remember the fervency and passion of our youthful love to Christ. It was that very desire to please Him that got us involved in the labors and tasks and trails to begin with. Our delight in Him brought real satisfaction in our duties for Him. We must not forget that all relationships have to be fed and watered. That is why our mission statement involves the notion of "cultivate." And we should be aware that when we forsake one love, we always transfer it to another. And often it is that we transfer that love to ourselves. It is our own selfishness, self-

centeredness and self-love that cause us to fall in love with the image in a mirror. Oh may we indeed instead love Jesus!

May we live our lives, even in the middle of trials and troubles, in grief and fear with a deep conviction to cultivate both duty and devotion.