

The Letter to Ephesus: Love Lost, Death Found

Ash Wednesday (YrB)

[Psalm 98:1-3; Genesis 3:21-23; Revelation 2:1-7; John 15:9-17]

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POINTS TO PONDER

- 1. How is our congregation like the one to which the letter is addressed in Ephesus?**
 - 2. For what did the angel commend the Christians at Ephesus? For what did he admonish them?**
 - 3. What kind of teachings did the Ephesians face in the pseudo-Apostles who came along. What do we face – is it similar or different from that which they faced.**
 - 4. What pattern of life (praxis) is the angel encouraging the Ephesians to continue in?**
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Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Let us Pray: Holy God, our lives are laid open before you: rescue us from the chaos of sin and through the death of your Son bring us healing and make us whole in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Greetings from John the apostle! He sends his regrets that he cannot be with you this evening, but as you know, he is a prisoner on the island of Patmos, about a hundred miles due south of here. He is deeply concerned for your well-being and faith, surrounded as you are by so much pagan wickedness and so many false teachers who even now are trying to make inroads into your congregation here at Ephesus.

What an amazing man! John is nearly one hundred years old, the last surviving apostle. He cannot walk anymore, as you already know from what you have seen. The last time he was with you, he was carried out of the church on a stretcher by his friends. His sermon was short that day, only three words: “Love one another.” He spoke these three words repeatedly as he was carried away.

Perhaps I should introduce myself. I am sure you think me a stranger. You are wondering what right I have to come into your church and speak to you unannounced like this. Let me assure you that though you have never seen me before, I know you well. In fact, I am your angel. No, do not be alarmed! I am not here to frighten you. I am here to proclaim the Gospel, encourage you in the things you are doing right, and do some prodding in those areas that need improvement. I have been with you all along. You just did not know it. I serve our common Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, so you might not fall into sin. And you have been keeping me busy!

You can call me Zoe, a name that means “life” in the Greek language. I am here to remind you that life is what God wants for you, eternal life, drinking the living water from the source in Jesus, continuing firm in Christian faith and love. Jesus is the one who commanded the things John wrote, the things He gave to me to share with you. John would much rather be here doing the

talking, but the Romans do not give weekend passes to prisoners. So, Jesus told John what to write, then said to give the letter to me. And here it is.

First, the good news: You are a remarkable congregation, the oldest and biggest in this part of Asia. This is as it should be because Ephesus is the provincial capital, wealthy and populous. Although your congregation has grown, I am fully aware that your journey in faith has not been easy. Remember your history. The apostle Paul began the work here more than forty years ago. When you met Paul, some of you were still disciples of John the Baptist. You had not yet heard that the Messiah, whose way the Baptist prepared, had come. Eagerly you heard Paul's good news. You were baptized, and the Holy Spirit filled you with His gifts.

For two difficult years Paul labored among you. There was strong opposition from the synagogue, but you honored the name of the Lord Jesus anyway. Miracles of healing were common among you in those early days. There were many who publicly repented of sin. Even sorcerers turned from evil to Christ, burning their scrolls, which were worth thousands of drachmas. In fact, so many people became Christians that the silversmiths who made statues of Artemis, goddess of Ephesus, began to lose business. Few seemed interested in visiting her temple anymore. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, but if Artemis was not a real goddess, who cared? The silversmiths whose livelihood was disappearing felt so threatened that they started a riot. Paul barely escaped with his life. Those were dangerous times for Christians in Ephesus, but you persevered.

Eventually, after suffering persecution in Palestine, the apostle John came to live among you as pastor and bishop. Under John's shepherding you flourished. Now, though he cannot be here with you, he would be pleased to see that you still are an example of good works and faithfulness. Other churches without a pastor might become lazy, neglecting works of charity. They might become morally and doctrinally lax with no one to encourage them, but not you. You have shown yourselves to be different.

Your beloved John, whom I serve, writes these words of Jesus to you: **"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."**¹ Moreover, Jesus says: **"You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."**² Those are the people willing to compromise faith for money, people who teach that immorality is okay because grace covers sin. But you know better than to use grace as an excuse to do wrong. History will show that one of your future pastors, Polycrates, will defend the resurrection of Jesus and continue to celebrate it on its exact anniversary each year despite manifest opposition from the culture and the apostate teachers. Such is the degree of firmness with which you cling to your convictions. Not only are you champions of the apostolic doctrine, you do not hesitate to expose those who would mislead your brothers and sisters in the congregation. Centuries from now, may the faith of this congregation be as steadfast as it is today.

¹ Revelation 2:2-3

² Revelation 3:6

There is only one problem, which may be imperceptible to some but is a creeping cancer that will destroy your church if it is not removed. That is the bad news I bring. Your hard work and good deeds, your doctrinal and moral purity will count for nothing without love for Christ. As His messenger, it is a hard thing I must tell you, but **“you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I [Jesus] will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”**³

You seem puzzled. Perhaps you are wondering how I can celebrate what is good in the congregation here at Ephesus then proceed to threaten that God might remove your church. Good works count for nothing without a heart that loves Christ who loves you. For **“without faith it is impossible to please [God].”**⁴ Jesus says, **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”**⁵ With His own life’s blood, He has poured out His love for you. Oh, the agony of soul and body Christ endured for you in His prayer at Gethsemane, in His trials before priests and politicians, and most of all on His cross. Oh, how He loves you! Now you are saved. Now you are declared innocent in the eyes of the Lord. Now you have been called to be part of God’s holy people.

Beloved, Christ our Lord has loved you with an everlasting love. He has given you faith and filled you with the Holy Spirit. Respond to His love for you with your love for Him. Repent of the coldness of your hearts. As Jesus reminds us: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.”**⁶

Christ’s love gives life to the Christian. It builds and sustains the church. It is central to everything. Without it, there is no life, only death. There may be zeal. There may be a wealth of ritual and form. There may be clearly defined and fervently defended doctrine. But unless Christ’s love – received and given – fills that zeal and doctrine, there is only spiritual death, and the church fades away. Its lampstand is removed, and all becomes darkness, as if Christ’s light had never shined among this people. Thank God, your lampstand is still here, still ready to shine with sacred fire, the fire of God’s love. Thank God there is still time!

As an angel, a holy messenger of God, I have never known the darkness of sin and death, and I never will. I have never known what it is to reign with God in heavenly glory – that is reserved for you, those who are redeemed by the blood of Christ. I am only a servant, a guardian, a caretaker. No, all these blessings in the body and blood of Christ are for you alone, human beings who are loved and chosen to be God’s children even before time began.

Remember who has loved you. Return to Him. Do not let your lamp grow dim and be taken away. **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”**⁷ Life, the greatest most precious gift, life that never perishes – this is God’s gift to all who receive His love in Jesus.

³ Revelation 2:4-5

⁴ cf. Hebrews 11:6

⁵ John 15:13

⁶ Matthew 22:37-38

⁷ Revelation 2:7

The tree of life is not God's gift to angels. It is for people like you, people who remember and return to Jesus, their first love, something I am confident you will do. After all, why would anyone turn down the love of Jesus? By the way, though I cannot eat from the tree of life, would you mind if I rejoice while you partake? It is the least you could do, considering how busy I have been keeping you out of trouble. Love one another with the love of Christ. Amen.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.⁸

⁸ Romans 15:13