



THE PRAYER CLOSET

ENCOURAGING & EQUIPPING BELIEVERS IN PRAYER

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THE CHURCH OF EPHEBUS

At the beginning of this year, the Holy Spirit began burdening my heart to pray for churches. In the past, I've had a concern to intercede for churches. Yet, this is something distinct, a burden that doesn't ease or go away. The church in America finds itself in a place where we've never been before culturally. We are facing challenges that we haven't faced before in the days ahead.

At the same time, the spiritual climate of our churches is disturbing. As I travel and preach, I find many churches in decline. Pastors terminated. Half-filled or empty churches. Congregations turned and focused inward. Little if any difference between the morality of those in the church and those out of the church. It all points to a significant problem in the spiritual health and vitality of the church.

In spite of the culture and spiritual climate, I have hope for the church! The church is still the bride of Christ. The church was bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is at the right hand of the Father interceding for the church. Jesus Christ has given the Holy Spirit and the Great Commission to the church. There is reason to have hope and to pray!

In the coming editions of *The Prayer Closet*, I would like us to walk through **Revelation 2-3**. In these chapters, we have Christ's encouragement, praise, warnings, and promises for the seven churches of Asia Minor. These words have abiding significance for His church in all generations. I also believe that they can teach us how to intercede for our churches and even the church at large in America.

The Church Of Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

The first church that Jesus addresses is the church at Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was quite prosperous since it was a center of travel and commerce. It had a major seaport, a theatre that housed 25,000 people, wealthy houses, and a library. The temple of the goddess Diana, one of the Seven

Wonders of the World, was located in Ephesus. Because of these things, it was called the "Light of Asia."

In this city, God raised up a church. In spite of the immorality, pleasure seeking, and demonic goddess worship, the church of Ephesus grew and thrived. What was Christ's message to the church of Ephesus?

Christ's Encouragement For The Church At Ephesus

Jesus begins by revealing truth about Himself. We need to derive our encouragement from Christ. He is the glorious, unchanging Son of God and we can be encouraged as we focus on Him. First, Jesus states that He holds the seven stars in His right hand (**2:1a**). The "seven stars" are the messengers or pastors of the churches. He makes known that the pastors are in His hands. He is the One who has placed them where they are, He is the One who empowers them, and He is the One who uses them.

This should stir us to pray for the pastors of the churches. Pastors are gifts of the risen Jesus Christ to His church. When Jesus gives us something, there is accountability for how we use it. He has given us His pastors and we are accountable to Him for how we respond to and treat those pastors. In order to fulfill our responsibility to Christ for this gift, we are to pray for the pastors He gives us.

Second, Jesus declares that He walks among the candlesticks (**2:1b**). The candlesticks refer to the churches. Jesus is teaching us that He is in our midst. He is present with us. We are not alone and we are not left to our own resources. The Head and Savior of our church is dwelling among us (**Leviticus 26:12**). This should bless us and fill us with hope. Our Lord is in our midst. He is ready and willing to help us!

This is a powerful encouragement for the church. Our Savior and Defender is powerfully present. The living Christ walks in our midst to empower and help us. Jesus is with His church! We are to acknowledge His presence and to surrender to His

power. This should stir us to call upon Him. This should motivate us to seek Him and depend on His power and resources.

Christ's Praise For The Church At Ephesus

Because Jesus walks in the midst of the church, He has intimate knowledge of the church. This is why He says, "I know" to the church of Ephesus. Jesus knew exactly what they had done for Him. He praises them for the following:

Their works and labors – They diligently served Jesus Christ with works of evangelism and mercy. They labored in the name of Jesus for His glory (2:3).

Their patience – Jesus mentions the "patience" of the Ephesians twice (2:2-3). This word means endurance in the face of great difficulty. Not only did they diligently serve but also they did it faithfully in adverse circumstances. They worked and labored for the long haul. In the face of adversity, they did not "faint"; they did not give up but persevered faithfully.

Their hatred of sin – The Ephesian church did not tolerate flagrant sin in their midst (2:2). They confronted sin. In the midst of their evil, immoral city, they withstood evil and pursued holiness.

Their exposure of false prophets – The Ephesian church tested what they were taught by the Word of God. They did not tolerate false teaching or teachers in their midst. Jesus especially commends them for their opposition to the Nicolaitines (2:6). It appears that the Nicolaitines abused the grace of God. They taught that because we are saved by grace, we are free to live any way that we desire. The Ephesians rejected this false teaching and would not allow it in their midst. Jesus Christ never forgets His church; He always knows what is going on in His churches. He walks in our midst and sees. He has great praise for this church.

Christ's Warning To The Church At Ephesus

Christ's presence with us is a blessing. He does see and know our labors for Him. However, it is also convicting. He also sees our sin and convicts it of us. While Christ had great praise for this church, He also warns them about a particular sin. What could have possibly been wrong with this church? When you read **Revelation 2:2-3**, Ephesus appears to be the ideal church. Yet, Christ who walks in the midst of the church saw a problem. The problem is that they had left their first love (2:4).

What does Jesus mean by leaving their first love? Jesus warns them that they no longer had the love for God that they once had. They had substituted labor for passion. They had exalted service for the Lord over intimacy with the Lord. The focus of their lives moved from their relationship with the Lord to their service for the Lord.

This is a danger for any church in any age. We can be so consumed with laboring for the Lord that we fail to love Him. I have a sign at my desk that I look at daily. It says, "Don't forget the Lord of the work as you do the work of the Lord." We can be so busy working, laboring, and standing for the Lord that we ignore our relationship to Him. Intimacy can take a back seat to all that we are doing for Him. A busy church is not necessarily a church that loves the Lord Jesus Christ.

While Jesus Christ desires our labors and faithfulness, it has to flow out of our relationship to Him. We serve because of our passion for Him. We labor because of the love we have for Him. We persevere because we see that He is worthy. At the foundation of all our labors for Him, we must have a growing intimate relationship with Him.

This requires making time for our relationship. It begins in our individual lives. We are to make the time to get into our Lord's Word and to spend time with Him in prayer. We have to make room for daily worship. At the same time, we must corporately worship and adore Him. The church has to pursue intimacy with the Lord through worship and prayer.

When Jesus speaks about returning to our first love, I don't think it is speaking only about our love for the Lord. I believe He is also speaking about our love for others. Jesus has given us the Great Commandment (**Matthew 22:37-40**). Loving God and loving others is interconnected. If we have left our love for the Lord, then our love for others will grow cold also.

It appears that the Ephesian church had left its love for others. I can see how this would happen. In the text, Jesus speaks about their stance against the wickedness against them. Jesus also tells us that they tested the doctrine of false teachers and rejected them. In taking a hard stance against wickedness and false doctrine, it would be easy to get hardened toward others. As they sought to oppose evil and heresy, it could cause them to be harsh toward others.

This too is a danger for any church in any age. As we oppose wickedness, we can forget to have compassion for sinful people. As we stand for truth and oppose false teaching, we can become petty and nitpick about the secondary teachings of the faith. Christ longs for us to love people and to have compassion for them.

Jesus warns them to repent (2:5). He calls them to return to Him. Only by returning to Him could their love for Him and others be rekindled. Jesus calls this church to return to Him! He gives us the same call today. We are to return to Jesus. We are to seek Him once again, pleading with Him to stir and renew our love for Him and for others.

Jesus warns them about the consequences of their failure to repent and turn to Him, “or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (2:5). The removal of the candlestick means that they would no longer have influence and impact for Christ. What does a candle do? It gives off light in the midst of the darkness. To remove their candlestick meant that they would lose the ability to shine in the midst of the darkness for Jesus Christ.

What does Jesus Christ desire from His church? He longs for a church that loves Him and others. He desires a church that labors, perseveres, and strives for holiness because they love Him and others. He wants a church that shines in the darkness by and because of His love for Him and others.

Christ’s Promise To The Church At Ephesus

Christ closes His message to this church with a promise, “To him that overcometh, will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (2:7). Christ promises those who overcome will experience His salvation in heaven. Those who persevere will have the joy of salvation and heaven one day. Although the battle is hard now, those who continue will one day have the rest and blessing of heaven. This is a powerful word for the church. The church is to be faithful regardless. We must repent and keep returning to Jesus. We must continue to labor and stand for Him and His Word. Yet, it will be worth it. Heaven is coming! Eternal rest and pleasure will be ours! The church is to keep clinging to her Lord and standing for Him!

How Can I Use This Passage To Pray?

The following are some suggestions on how to use this text to pray for your church and the church at large:

Adore and worship Jesus. This text gives us much fuel to praise Jesus. Jesus is the One who gives and sustains spiritual leaders. He is the One who walks in

our midst, seeing, empowering, convicting, and helping. He is the One who is worthy to be loved. He is the One who will bring us to heavenly blessing and rest. Use this text to magnify Jesus Christ!

Confess your need of Jesus. It is stirring to hear Jesus say that He walks in our midst – that He is with us. That should drive us to confess our need of Him. It should lead us to acknowledge our dependence on Him and to admit our lack of power and resources.

Pray for the work of Jesus in your church. Jesus commended this church for a variety of things. Plead that Jesus will produce these things in your church:

- That you will faithfully serve and labor in the name of Jesus in and out of the church.
- That you will persevere in the face of adversity and opposition.
- That you will hate evil and will stand in opposition to wickedness.
- That you will love the truth of God’s Word and will expose false teaching.

These things please Christ; ask that these will characterize your church.

Plead that your love for the Lord will be rekindled. What pleases our Lord most? It is that we love Him with all our heart, soul, and strength. Ask that He will renew the love of the church for Christ its Lord and Head. Pray that we will not be content to substitute our labor and works for an intimate relationship with God through the Word and prayer.

Ask that your love for others will be stirred. In a wicked world, it’s easy to see people as our enemy. When the church is opposed, it’s not hard to focus on those who are leading the attack. Yet, we must remember that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but the forces of evil (**Ephesians 6:12**). We must remember that those outside Christ are people who will face an eternity in hell. We are to have compassion for them and to carry out acts of mercy for them. Plead that your church will have a fresh love for others – those in and out of the church.

Plead that your church will exercise a powerful influence for Christ. Jesus reveals that the candlesticks are the churches. As we’ve said, the purpose of the candle is to give light in the midst of darkness. We live in a sinful, dark world. It is our calling to be that light in the midst of the darkness, holding forth the good news of salvation as the only hope for any person. Instead of having our candlestick removed, we are to pray that we would please Christ and would have deep impact for Him in the world.

Pray for the grace and power to overcome. Jesus gives a powerful promise to the overcomer. The

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overcomer will enjoy the rest and pleasure of heaven. Since He makes this promise, we are to ask for help to fulfill it. Call on Him to grant the other believers and you the power to persevere through all things. Ask for help to cling to Christ and His Word no matter what adversity or opposition confronts you. Jesus makes the promise. Now we are to approach Him with the promise, asking Him to enable us to fulfill it. Ask that your church and you will be overcomers that will eat of the tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God. Pray Jesus' word back to Him!

Prayer Closet News

At the writing of this newsletter, we are waiting on an individual to start work on the septic tank, our bathrooms, and kitchen area. We are also waiting for dry weather in order to move from our old office to the new facility. We have had a great deal of rain and it has hindered our ability to move the tables and other equipment to the new facility. Once we do this, we will be able to get set up and all ministry operations will be carried out at the facility. Things are coming together even if they are at a slow pace. They're going slower than I want them to, but I trust God and His timing in all these matters.

When we first started on this journey, all we had was a piece of property and a vision. When I say that is all we had, I literally mean that's all we had. I had no idea how any of this would come to fruition. We had enough money for the ministry to operate and that's it. Through it all, God has been faithful and provided. He has made the way when I didn't see any way. I give God all the glory and honor because it belongs solely to Him.

Please continue to pray for this ministry and this facility. We need your intercession. Please consider also giving to this ministry. The only reason that I ask you to give is that God may be glorified in and through this ministry and that you will be blessed for your giving. God bless you richly!

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