

Desirable! Fragrant! Faithful!

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GOD'S MESSAGE TO THE FIRST CHURCHES OF REVELATION
EPHESUS, SMYRNA, PERGAMOS

REVELATION 2:1-17

EPHESUS

THE CHURCH WHICH WAS DESIRABLE TO GOD

An exposition of Revelation 2:1-7

“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write...”verse 1

The first church of the seven churches of Revelation was called Ephesus. This was chosen because its name and condition was a fitting representation of the first period of the Christian church. “To the angel in the church” is the original reading. This alludes to the leader or elder.

MEANING OF THE WORD EPHESUS

Ephesus means “desirable” and this was a true description of the early church during most of the first one hundred years of its existence.

The time period extended to approximately 100 AD and corresponds with the white horse period of the first of the seven seals. However, the seven churches do not necessarily correspond with the other periods of the seven seals.

CHRIST'S SPECIAL TITLE FOR EPHESUS

Who, “...holds the seven stars.. .and walks in the midst of the seven candlesticks...” verse 1

Why does Jesus depict himself in this way to the early church? The early Christians faced a hostile pagan world in fulfilling Christ's gospel commission. They were the pioneers of the faith and to know that Jesus in heaven above, held them as it were in his very own right hand, the hand of power and authority, was a tremendous comfort and gave a serene sense of security. As Jesus had previously promised,

“My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me...they shall never perish [eternally] neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand ...and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.”
John 10:27-29

This promise is for every servant of God of every age. It also reminds God's servant that everything he accomplishes is due to Christ who holds and empowers him. Failure to realize this can lead a religious leader to become a “fallen star”.

“Wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever” Jude 1:13

“And walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks” verse 1

The word “walk” denotes ministry, care, watchfulness in regard to his servants. In the Old Testament tabernacle the priests walked to and fro in their daily ministry. Likewise, Jesus Christ, as our great high priest, walks to and fro in the spiritual temple on earth, caring for his faithful servants.

“I know thy works”

Seven times this is stated, denoting Christ’s perfect and complete knowledge of his people.

“All things are naked and opened to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” Hebrews 4:13

Jesus notices every mark of loyalty as well as every mark of compromise. He recognizes every act of love even though no one on earth may detect it.

JESUS RECOMMENDS EPHESUS FOR THREE THINGS

“Thy labor and thy patience and how thou canst not bear them which are evil” verse 1

1. The word “labor” involves labor with weariness. The early Christians did not make great professions, they were people of action.

“The love of Christ urged them on.” 2 Corinthians 5:14. This was graphically illustrated in the Book of Acts under the power of Pentecost.

“They went everywhere preaching the word” Acts 8:14

In the Roman Empire alone over six million people were won to the faith by 100 AD, i.e. in 69 years. Edward Gibbon declared,

“There is the strongest reason to believe that before the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, the faith of Christ had been preached in every province and in all the great cities of the empire” (1)

2. “Thy patience...”

The word denotes persevering endurance; not passive but brave and persistent endurance. The early Christians did not give up nor give in.

“The gospel ...was preached to every creature under heaven” Colossians 1:23

The feats of the early Christians comprise one of the greatest events of history. From 120 people (Acts 1:15) to over six million in 69 years is testimony to the persevering labors of those early believers.

3. “Thou canst not bear them which are evil”

Christ commends the intolerance of the early Christians. He still calls for intolerance within the church of evil people. We are counseled to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2) but we are to “abhor that which is evil.” (Romans 12:9) This is in striking contrast to the usual attitude of most Christians. We tend to tolerate evil in the church with the excuse that such people need our help and sympathy. Jesus gave clear instruction on this matter. After efforts to bring such a person to repentance:

“If he neglect to hear the church, let him be to thee as an heathen man and a publican” Matthew 18:15-17

This means that such a person must be separated from church membership and viewed as one who needs to be won to Christ. The church of God should be publicly seen to be intolerant of evil.

“I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me.” Psalm 101:3

“No man loves God truly who cannot hate evil” Ellicott’

“We must show all meekness to men but we must show a just zeal against their sins” Matthew Henry

This attitude is the sign of a spiritually healthy church. Tolerance of evil confirms people in their sin. The rebuke of evil can lead to repentance of sin and is a safeguard to the church, especially for the weaker members.

“Thou has tried them which say they are apostles and are not and hast found them liars.” verse 2

The early Christians tested all who claimed to be apostles, teachers, etc. They knew that they were engaged in a spiritual warfare with the great enemy of Christ and so were alert to the attempts of false teachers to influence the church. They therefore investigated, examined and checked every person who claimed to be an apostle, etc. The apostle Paul had specifically warned the Ephesian elders of the dangers to be guarded against:

“Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God ...for I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch and remember...” Acts 20:28-31

The early Christians did watch and remember.

“Zeal for pure doctrine characterized the Ephesian church.” Ellicott

Who were the false apostles whom true believers found to be liars? They were a group of Jewish believers called “Judaizers”. The apostle Paul called them “false brethren” (Galatians 1:7; 2:4) He warned:

“Beware of dogs [backbiters] beware of evil workers, beware of the Concision.” Philippians 3:2

The word “concision” means “mutilators” and refers to the Judaizers who demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised and keep the ceremonial law of Moses.

“There rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying that it was needful to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

“Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye cannot be saved.” Acts 15:1, 5.

The Judaizers were a trial to the early church but the leaders tested and rejected them. This should always be the work of faithful leaders of the church.

“And hast borne and hast patience and for my name’s sake hast labored and hast not fainted” verse 3

The early Christians could not bear them which were evil but they could bear persecution and suffering for Christ’s sake. In their marvelous labors in extending the gospel they certainly did not faint. For example, notice the exploits of the apostles themselves

James: Son of Zebedee. Slain by Herod Agrippa 44 AD

Phillip: Preached the gospel in Upper Asia. At Heliopolis in Phrygia he was scourged, imprisoned and crucified in 54 AD

Matthew: Laboured in Parthia and Ethiopia where he was martyred in the city of Nadabah 60 AD by being slain with a halberd.

James the Less: A brother of Jesus, an overseer of the early Jerusalem church. At 94 years he was stoned by his fellow Jews and his brains were dashed out by a fuller's club.

Matthias: Replaced Judas Iscariot, the traitor. Stoned at Jerusalem and then beheaded.

Andrew: Peter's brother. Labored in many Asiatic nations. On arrival at Edessa, Syria, he was crucified.

Mark: Laboured in Egypt. At Alexandria he was dragged to pieces by a mob of idolators.

Peter: Peter labored mostly for the Jews. Finally at Rome he was arrested during Nero's reign and crucified upside down.

Paul: The chief apostle to the Gentiles who labored incessantly in promoting the gospel. Was beheaded by Nero about 68 AD.

Jude or Thaddeus: Crucified at Edessa, 72 AD.

Bartholomew: Labored in several countries. Finally in India he was cruelly beaten and crucified by a mob of idolators.

Thomas: Labored in Parthia and India. Killed by Hindu priests, by being thrust through with a spear.

Luke: Labored with St. Paul in various countries. Tradition says he was hanged from an olive tree by pagan priests of Greece.

Simon Zealotes: Labored in Mauretania, Africa and Britain where he finally was crucified 74 AD.

John: Labored in Asia Minor. Arrested and sent to Rome where at Domitian's command he was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil. He was miraculously preserved whereupon the emperor banished him to the lonely isle of Patmos.

Barnabas: Claimed to have been martyred in 73 AD.

Nicodemus: Suffered death at Rome under Domitian.

Timothy: Labored in Ephesus until 97 AD when he was clubbed to death by pagan people. (2)

Every apostle except John died a martyr but through their endeavors the world of that day was turned upside down. The church of the period of Ephesus truly labored for Christ's sake and did not faint. As Dr. Vaughan declared:

"There is total patience and abhorrence of evil and discernment and again patience and endurance and unwearied exertion. What can be wanting here?" (3)

But finally the early church did begin to falter. What was the problem? It was not sinfulness or heresy or compromise, but...

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." verse 4

This represented a decline in the zeal of God's people of this period. When did this commence? Probably after the death of the apostles.

St. Paul had warned that "after my departing-of your own selves shall men arise speaking perverse things." Acts 20:25-31. Paul was martyred about 68 AD. John wrote Revelation about 96 AD and in his day some false leaders were already in the church. (3 John 1:9, 10)

It appears that after about fifty years the decline commenced.

“Little by little a change came.” (4)

“Zeal began to wane.”

“Coldness crept into the church” “piety was rapidly waning” (5)

“She became selfish and ease loving” “The spirit of worldliness was cherished” (6)

CHRIST’S WARNING

“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen and repent and do the first works; or else I will come to thee quickly and remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” verse 5

Here is God’s way of true revival in the church of God.

1. “Remember from whence thou art fallen”

Christ calls the believer to recount his past experience of how he loved Christ; to remember the original standards and his labors in the hope that he will realize how far he has fallen - to see how love of self has replaced love for Christ.

2. Repent

Seek for a change of mind or attitude which the Holy Spirit will surely give if it is sought for with all the heart.

3. Return or Reform

“Do the first works” Let love be demonstrated by positive action. Love is the fulfilling of the law, love is full hearted obedience. To encourage repentance and reformation Christ warns of the consequences of non-repentance and commends them for their attitude toward false teachers.

“Else I will come to thee and remove thy candlestick out of his place.”

The candlesticks in the sanctuary were the light bearers. The removal of the candlestick indicated that it was no longer disseminating the light, and so with a church, the spiritual candlestick in the spiritual sanctuary now on earth. If a church loses its love, it loses its light. Light and love are closely allied. “God is love”; “God is light.” Therefore, if a church fails to return to its first love, it will have no light and it will be removed from the spiritual temple. It may continue as a professing church of God but it is not recognized as such by heaven.

The study of church history sadly reveals that every church through the centuries, if it has not disappeared through martyrdom, has ultimately had its candlestick removed. Faith in Christ is not inherited and the natural tendency of the human heart is self-love. As Jesus so significantly said,

“He that endures to the end, the same shall be saved.” Matthew 24:13

Christ’s Commendation of Their Attitude Toward False Teachers

“Thou hates the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate” verse 6

Christ did not hate the people but the things they did, likewise with the early church. They loved the sinner but hated the sin. Three of the early Church Fathers record the existence of a sect called the Nicolaitanes, in the second century AD. The Nicolaitanes are also named under the Pergamos period. There they are described in detail.

Christ’s Appeal to All Believers Concerning the Churches

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the Churches.” verse 7

In verse 1, it is Christ who speaks to the church. But here it is the Spirit. What is the significance? The Holy Spirit is Christ's representative on earth. He is the one and only Vicar of Christ.

“When the Comforter is come ...he shall testify of me” John 15:26 -9

“When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth, for he shall not speak of himself, but whatsoever he shall hear [from me] that shall he speak” John 16:13

It is not only the lessons from Ephesus that believers should heed, but the lessons from all the seven churches. What Christ reveals concerning each church is important instruction for every saint and for every other church of every age.

Main Lessons from the Ephesus Church Letter

1. God holds his true servants firmly in his hand.
2. God takes note of our labors for his cause.
3. God takes note of our attitude toward evil.
4. The danger of declining love and the growth of self love.

“These words [2:4, 5] are applicable to-churches in their present condition. The love of God has been lost and this means the absence of love for one another. Self, self, self is cherished and is striving for the supremacy. God rebukes his people for their sins, that he may humble them and lead them to seek his face.” (7)

Promise to the Overcomer

“To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” verse 7

What must the believer overcome? In the Ephesian period it meant responding to the call to remember, repent and return to one's first love. This meant the denial of self, which is the biggest battle of every believer of every age. The saint who gains this victory is regarded by God as having attained to perfection of character. As one author of great spiritual discernment wrote:

“The sanctification of the soul by the working of the Holy Spirit is the implanting of Christ's nature in humanity-when self is merged in Christ, love springs forth spontaneously. The completeness of Christian character is attained when the impulse to help and bless others springs constantly from within” (8)

This is to be the aim and the daily prayer of every true believer.

“Eat of the tree of life”

This means immortality. Originally in Eden the Lord declared,

“And now, lest he [Adam] put forth his hand and eat of the tree of life and live forever” **Genesis** 3:22

God “only [alone] has immortality.” 1 **Timothy** 6:16

Therefore, in the kingdom, in order to maintain immortality, the saved will need to continually eat of the tree of life.

“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life.” Revelation 22:14

“On either side of the river [of life] was there the tree of Life, which bare twelve manner of fruits and yielded her fruit every month and the leaves of the tree were for the healing [service] of the nations.” Revelation 22:2

“Which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

In the original paradise, the tree of life was also in the midst of the garden (**Genesis 2:9**). Is the original paradise of Eden the same as the paradise of the future, that is promised to the saints? This is answered under Revelation 21 and 22. One thing is certain - the human race in Adam and Eve was banned from paradise and the tree of life, but in Christ, the second Adam, all who believe and follow him will be restored to paradise and to the tree of life and immortality.

SMYRNA

THE CHURCH WHICH TO GOD WAS FRAGRANT

An Exposition of Revelation 2:8-11

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things said the first and the last, which was dead and is alive” verse 8

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS TITLE

1. “Which was dead and is alive” This expression reminded the saints in this period that what was befalling them, had also befallen Jesus. He already had passed through a similar experience and fully understood their sufferings.

2. “The first and the last” As shown in Revelation 1, this title was drawn from the Old Testament (9) and represented Jesus Christ as being in complete control. He is the victorious one. He is first on the battlefield and he will be the last on the field, indicating complete victory. This is the One who is with his people amid the fierce fires of martyrdom.

Christ Commends His Saints for Three Things

“I know thy works and tribulation and poverty [but thou art rich]” verse 9

Smyrna represented the period of persecution under the pagan Roman Caesars. As the gospel spread throughout the then-known world, the bastions of paganism began to crumble. This brought furious reactions. The surrounding nations resisted the gospel and martyred those who accepted it.

In the Roman empire the rulers finally turned upon the Christians and millions sacrificed their lives for Christ. Sites of many martyrdoms can still be seen today, such as the Circus Maximus, the Coliseum, St. Peter’s Square and other places in Rome. Often Christians were sacrificed in the arenas. Some were tied to poles around the arena, smothered with pitch and set alight. Then the wild beasts were released on the remainder of the Christians in the arena. The remarkable poise, courage and steadfastness of the Christians was a telling demonstration of the power of Christ. As a result, multitudes were influenced to accept the gospel and the saying was coined,

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”

This was because wherever martyrdoms occurred, new believers sprang up as a result.

Meaning of the Word “Smyrna”

Smyrna means “sweet smelling”. It is derived from myrrh, the Arabian herb, a source of aromatic ointment. When myrrh was crushed, it gave forth a beautiful fragrance. This was a perfect picture of the saints of the Smyrnan period. The saints were crushed in martyrdom, but in their dying they rendered a testimony to their faith in Christ which was so impressive it was like beautiful fragrance to the multitudes. Millions were convinced and accepted Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Myrrh was also used to embalm the dead (John 19:39). In this period the church passed through an experience of death in which the church appeared to be weakened and destroyed. But, in fact, the death experience actually preserved the church. It purged out corruption and selfishness enabling the church to give forth a sweet-smelling fragrance in its expression of true Christian virtues.

“I know...thy poverty”

The earthly possessions of believers were frequently confiscated by the state. Many Christians were forced to hide and worshipped underground in the catacombs. Others were driven out to distant parts. They suffered “the spoiling of their goods”. “They were destitute, afflicted, tormented” Hebrews 11:37

“But thou art rich”

Not materially rich, but spiritually. By their self-sacrifice they “laid up treasure in heaven”. No wonder God permits persecution. Today the church is materially rich but spiritually it is “poor and blind and naked”. Revelation 3:17. This is one of the great lessons of church history. When the church is in adversity it is spiritually enriched, when the church is in affluence it is spiritually poor. This is generally true also of individual Christians. This explains why the church to be translated must first pass through a time of trouble in order to be fit for translation.

“I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan” verse 9

This may apply to the literal Jews in their relentless hostility toward the gospel of Christ. The Jews are not “Jews” in the New Testament meaning of the term. Originally the Jews were those of the tribe of Judah. The word means “praise”.

However, the New Testament shows that the term now has a spiritual connotation and applies only to true believers.

“He is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision [the mark of the literal Jew] which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew which is one inwardly and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the Letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” Romans 2:28,29

This indicates that the true, spiritual Jew is the one who has the praise of God.

“If ye be Christ’s then are ye Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise!” Galatians 3:29

The term “Jew” is a deeply religious term but Satan has led the Hebrew people, especially the leaders, to bring the term into disrepute.

The Jewish synagogues were “fountains of persecution”. This expression was coined in that very period (10) because in them were hatched by the Jewish leaders the slanderous accusations against the innocent Christians. In the Book of Acts the Apostles, the reader may discern behind the persecutions of the early Christians the slanderous lies of the Jewish leaders. (11)

The Jewish leaders inspired others to resist the gospel its they have done through the centuries. By vicious lies they instilled fear in the minds of the pagan peoples concerning the Christian faith. They led the people to blame the Christians for the natural calamities that fell upon society. The persecution of the apostle John by Domitian was due to the false accusations of the Jews to the emperor. In the martyrdom of the saintly Polycarp, the Jews played a leading role.

“Even though he was to be burned on the Sabbath - the Jews were so anxious for Polycarp’s death that they came in large numbers to the stadium bringing faggots for the fire in which Polycarp so magnificently died.”(12)

Satan is the instigator of lies and slander (John 8:44) therefore the synagogues where the lying slanders against the saints were conceived and given birth, were in reality “The synagogue of Satan”.

“Fear none of those things which you shall suffer” verse 10

The initial reaction to this admonition is that it is expecting the impossible. The thought of suffering and martyrdom naturally rouses one’s fears. The instinct of self-preservation causes apprehension. But when God calls a saint to martyrdom the Holy Spirit takes away his fear and gives supernatural courage. One of the astonishing marks of the martyrs was their courage in facing death. They unflinchingly faced the lions.

“They loved not their lives unto death!” Revelation 12:11

As Tertullian, a church leader, wrote to the Roman leader,

“Kill us, torture us, grind us to dust-the oftener we are mowed down by you the more in numbers we grow; the blood of the Christians is seed” (13)

“Behold the devil will cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried and ye shall have tribulation ten days.” verse 10

Thirteen Roman emperors initiated or supported the persecution of the Christians but ten of them were more pronounced.

ROMAN EMPERORS WHO PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

Trajan, 98-117 AD

There were many popular tumults against Christians. He issued an edict making perseverance in Christianity a capital offence. There were many martyrs including Simeon, Bishop of Jerusalem and Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch.

Hadrian, 117-138 AD

The populace at the games and shows clamored for the killing of Christians. He decreed that Christians must be tried and convicted before execution.

Antoninus Pius, 138-161 AD

Magistrates accused the Christians of impiety. In Asia-minor Christians were held responsible for the numerous earthquakes and were violently attacked by the people. Polycarp, the saintly Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred in 156 AD. Before the fire was lit, the judge called on him to renounce Christ and save his life. Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served Christ and he never did me wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who hath saved me?” Fifteen hundred Christians were slain on one occasion and eight hundred on another.

Marcus Aurelius, 161-180 AD

The philosophers falsely accused the Christians of horrible crimes such as incest and feasting on the flesh of murdered children. As a result, there were furious outbursts against Christians, producing one of the most terrible periods of persecution. Many were martyred. Churches were destroyed at Lyons and Vienne. Numbers of apologies were written on behalf of the Christians including Justin Martyr, Athenagorus and Tatian.

Commodus, 180-192 AD

During his reign the usual persecution, suffering and death of Christians occurred because of their renunciation of paganism.

Septimus Severus, 193-211 AD

Numerous Christians were killed in the provinces. Presidents were permitted to persecute Christians whenever they pleased. Laws were enacted forbidding the propagation of the Christian faith.

Alexander Severus, 222-235 AD

Several instances of persecution, but he indicated that Christianity should be tolerated.

Maximus, 235-238 AD

He incited the people and the magistrates to attack the Christians and many atrocities were perpetuated.

Decius Trajan, 249-251 AD

He issued severe edicts against Christians and commanded the governors to utterly exterminate the Christian faith. This was the worst of the martyrdoms to date.

Gallus, 251-253 AD

Persecution continued with Christians being blamed for the various calamities and pestilences.

Valerian, 253-260 AD

Christians were forbidden to meet together - many martyrs.

Aurelian, 270-275 AD

He issued persecuting edicts against the Christians.

Diocletian, 284-305 AD (14)

“He became so puffed up with pride, because of his success as ruler, that he commanded that he should be worshipped as God. He claimed that he was brother to the sun and moon and adorning his shoes with gold and precious stones, he commanded the people to kiss his feet.” (15)

This demand led to the fiercest period of persecution under the Caesars. It continued for exactly ten years, 303-313 AD, and we suggest that this was the fulfillment of the prediction that the Smyrian church would have tribulation ten days. Seeing this prophecy employs symbolic terms, any time period mentioned should be interpreted as symbolic time. (16) This would represent ten years on the basis that in symbolic prophecy a day represents a year. (17)

Prior to 303 AD there had been a period of peace and tranquility for the Christians. The faith flourished. Even some of the emperors were favorable toward it. Many in responsible civil positions were Christians. Relatives of the emperors accepted the faith. There were huge congregations in almost every city.

Soon, however, signs of degeneracy appeared. Rivalry and contention among the bishops was prevalent as well as among the church members.

“Fraud, malice and envy prevailed in every congregation.” (18)

Undoubtedly the unconverted were widespread in the church. To save the church, God intervened. He permitted the rise of Diocletian who beset the church with fierce persecution.

1. He issued decrees for the overthrow of Christian temples throughout the Roman empire.
2. He issued a decree for the burning of the Christian scriptures.
3. He issued edicts for the replacement of Christians who occupied positions of responsibility, such as magistrates, etc.
4. He ordered that elders and bishops be cast into prison and tortured in order to force them to engage in idol worship. (19)

EXAMPLES OF THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE CHRISTIANS

Several thousand Christians at one place assembled to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The temple was surrounded and locked. The Christians were called upon to offer incense to Jupiter or else be burned alive. The answer came from within: “We are all Christians, Christ is our only God and King. We will worship him and his Father and the Holy Ghost and we are now ready to be offered to God.” The response? The temple was set alight and some thousands of men, women and children were burned alive.

The emperor sent an edict to a certain city in Phrygia commanding the citizens to worship idols. The mayor and other leaders confessed that they were Christians with all those in the city. The result? The whole city and its inhabitants were burned alive.

Eustratius of Arabrace witnessed the endurance of the martyrs. He was so affected that he himself thirsted for martyrdom. He openly professed his faith in Christ. The pagans rebuked him for his madness and vanity. He was arrested, cruelly beaten and burned alive.

Some ancient authorities claimed that in Britain under the Diocletian persecution, “all the Christians were utterly destroyed”. (20)

In Portugal, a beautiful maiden of noble birth became a sincere and devout believer. She turned her back on worldly pleasures. When persecution fell upon her fellow Christians, she took a bold stand. Through much prayer she was given a remarkable spirit of resistance to her persecutors. Her parents moved to the country in order to save Eulalia from martyrdom. But Eulalia was so moved by the Holy Spirit that she stole away by night, traveling through thorny bush and darkness until she reached Emerita, the city from whence her parents had fled. She confronted the tribunal and rebuked them for their slaughter of good people. She said,

“I am one of the Christians, an enemy of your devilish sacrifices. I spurn your idols under my feet. I confess God Omnipotent with my heart and mouth. Isis, Apollo, Venus! What are they? A thing of naught - the work of men’s hands. The emperor falls down and worships a stone. Go to therefore, bum, cut and mangle these earthly members. It is easy to break a brittle substance, but the inward mind thou shall not hurt.”

In fury the judge decreed,

“Hangman, take her, pull her out by the hair of her head and torment her to the uttermost.” Then, sensing her youthful beauty, he changed his attitude and said, “Will you kill yourself, so young a flower? Does not the glittering and golden pomp of a bridal move you? Behold, the instruments prepared for thy terrible death. Either you shall be beheaded with this sword, or else with wild beasts pulled to pieces or be cast into a fiery furnace and be consumed to ashes. If you will take with your fingers a little salt and incense and put it into the censors, you shall be delivered from punishment.

Eulalia did not reply, but instead threw down the idol and spurned with her feet the incense. Her executioners took her, pulled her joints one from the other and with talons tore her sides to the bones. Through it all, Eulalia praised God with singing, “Lord, I will not forget thee. What a pleasure O Christ, to remember your triumphant victories.”

She continued singing without lament or weeping but full of cheer. Her executioners gored her flesh with an iron grate and hurdle and then burned her on every side of her body with flaming torches. When the flame reached her head, she expired in peace. (21)

In Gaul, a Roman legion comprising 6660 men was totally Christian. It was led by a Christian called Mauritius. The legion was ordered by the emperor to attack the Christians. The legion refused. The emperor executed every tenth soldier. They committed themselves to God “with great joy” encouraged by their leader Mauritius.

“He was summoned to the emperor and in his defense declared, ‘We are your soldiers, but also the servants of God. We will rather obey him than you. We offer our hands against any other enemy, but to defile our hands with the blood of innocents, that we may not do-behold we cast down our weapons and resist not, for we would rather be killed than kill; and die guiltless than live guilty. We are ready to suffer fire and sword and any other torments. We confess ourselves to be Christians; we cannot persecute Christians, nor will we sacrifice to your devilish idols.’”

The emperor ordered another tenth of the legion to be executed. When the remainder still refused to murder their fellow Christians, Caesar ordered the whole army to destroy the Christian legion. The Christian legionnaires made no resistance. They yielded their lives to their persecutors and were slain. (22)

What a telling testimony was borne by the early Christians! As the Revelator declared in chapter 12:

“They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony and they loved not their lives unto death.” Revelation 12:11

It is abundantly clear that the saints were inspired to martyrdom by the Holy Spirit. So often they appeared to deliberately invite death.

This is not normal and some authors have made the mistake of claiming that the martyrs were overzealous and that many died needlessly. (23) The truth is that the martyrs were given supernatural boldness and courage and supernatural deliverance from pain.

“In vain were Satan’s efforts to destroy the church of Christ by violence. The great controversy in which the disciples of Jesus yielded up their lives, did not cease when these faithful standard-bearers fell at their post. By defeat they conquered. God’s workman, were slain, but His work went steadily forward. The gospel continued to spread and the number of its adherents to increase. It penetrated into regions that were in accessible even to the eagles of Rome. Thousands were imprisoned and slain; but others sprung up to fill their places. Their living example and dying testimony were a constant witness for the truth; and where least expected, the subjects of Satan were leaving his service and enlisting under the banner of Christ.” (24)

We believe that in the future when God requires martyrs, he will inspire in the same manner, men and women and children, to boldly testify even to the point of inviting death and even challenging their persecutors to martyr them. As in the past, God will use such witnesses to save many that are still in Babylon.

PROMISE TO THE OVERCOMER

“He that overcomes, shall not be hurt of the second death” verse 11

What were the believers of the Smyrnian period to overcome or conquer? Without doubt the fear of suffering and death for the sake of Christ. The reward is that if they overcame they would not be hurt of, (or experience), the second death. Scripture speaks of several kinds of death. There is spiritual death and literal death. Spiritual death is the lack of spiritual life. “Dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1) which is the lot of all who are not born again in Christ. Literal or physical death is the cessation of physical life and there are two kinds of physical death. The first death is the result of the sin of Adam, the father of the race.

“In Adam all die.” 1 Corinthians 15:22

“As by one man sin entered into the world and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” Romans 5:12

The first death is temporary. From it all men return. Everyone comes back from the tomb.

“Marvel not at this: For the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, to the resurrection of damnation.” John 5:28, 29

We are all coming back from death - we have no say, no choice; all return from death. However, we do have a choice as to when we come back. There are two main resurrections, the first resurrection and the second resurrection, the resurrection to life or the resurrection to damnation or judgment, i.e. punishment. We have a choice in which resurrection we come back. Those who are faithful to Christ return in the first resurrection to eternal life.

“Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection; on such the second death hath no power.” Revelation 20:6

But they who return in the second resurrection, return for punishment and the punishment will be “the second death”. This resurrection transpires at the close of the one thousand years of Revelation 20 and the death that ensues is destruction in the lake of fire. From this death there is no recovery. It is annihilation.

“I saw the dead small and great, stand before God-and they were judged, every man according to his works. And death and hell [grave] were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.” Revelation 20:12-15

“The lake which burns with fire and brimstone which is the second death.” Revelation 21:8

The final fate of the unsaved is not eternal life in torment but cessation of life in destruction. The destruction is “everlasting destruction”

2 Thessalonians 1:9. Thus the promise to the overcomer of the Smyrnian period of the church and to Christians of all periods who overcome is that they will have part in the first resurrection and on them the “second death will have no power”. They will be impervious to the forces of destruction. Nothing will ever hurt them again. What a comfort to the martyrs as they faced their executioners. As Jesus counseled,

“Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul [or character] but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28

PERGAMOS

The Church Which Amid Popularity Was Faithful. Exposition of Revelation 2:12-17.

“Unto the angel [leader] of the church in Pergamos write.” verse 12.

The name Pergamos means height or elevation. The city of Pergamos was located on a thousand foot high hill making it ideal for defense. Pergamos represents the period of the church when Christianity became popular. The church was exalted by society. This period undoubtedly commenced with the reign of Constantine the Great about 320 AD.

At this time Satan changed his form of attack upon the church. Heretofore he had used persecution, but this purified, strengthened and enlarged the church. He therefore was compelled to employ different tactics. He now made the church popular. Here was great peril.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST’S TITLE

“He which hath the sharp sword with two edges.” Verse 12.

As indicated under Revelation 1:1b, this title denotes the power of Christ’s word especially in the execution of judgment.

“The word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart... all things are naked and opened to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” Hebrews 4:12, 13.

Popularity breeds corruption, and Christ’s title suggests that in this period when corruption would pervade the professed church, he will be all-discerning in regard to the condition of his people and will deal with them in judgment. (25)

CHRIST'S COMMENDATION

"I know thy works and where thou dwells, even where Satan's seat is and you held fast my name and hast not denied my faith..." verse 13.

In spite of the fact that believers were in a perilous position of popularity, Christ declares that they were faithful. What was Satan's seat or throne? The role of Pergamos in the strategy of Satan in his opposition to the cause of God is used to illustrate the problems of the saints in this period. Pergamos was a thriving and powerful centre of paganism. It contained renowned memorials to idolatry. There were:

1. The huge altar to Zeus, commemorating their victory over the invading Gauls, the remnant of whom were the Galatians.
2. The famous shrine and temple of Aesculopius, the serpent god of medicine.
3. The centre of the worship of Dionyses - the Bull god.
4. A prominent centre of the worship of Bacchus and Venus.
5. A great temple to Athena.
6. Temples to the Roman emperors Augustus, Trajan and Severus to whom were given divine honors.

Most of all, Pergamos was then the seat of Babylonian Sun worship, the source of all idolatry, astrology and occultism. In 487 BC, 50 years after the Persians conquered Babylon, the Chaldean system of Sun worship was compelled to flee from Babylon because of Persian hostility. They moved westward and established their centre in Pergamos, independent of Persian control.

"The defeated Chaldeans fled to Asia Minor and fixed their central college at Pergamos and took the palladium of Babylon, the cubic stone, with them. Here independent of state control, they carried on the rites of their religion." (26)

The original seat or throne of Satan was in Babylon. (Isaiah 14:4, 12) He was Babylon's invisible king. In 487 BC Pergamos was his earthly seat. The Pergamene kings embraced the Babylonian religion and assumed its leadership under the Babylonian title of Pontifex Maximus or Chief Pontiff. It was the state religion. In 133 BC, Attalus III bequeathed the kingdom of Pergamos to Rome with all its offices, political and religious. This is how Satan's throne was transferred to Rome. Julius and Augustus Caesar were the first to assume the position of Pontifex Maximus. Later the Christian emperor Gratian (380 AD,) rejected the title whereupon it was assumed by Pope Damasus and has ever since been one of the official titles of the bishops of Rome. Pergamos therefore was the connecting link between the two Babylons.

Pergamos represents Satan's change of tactics in the third period of Christian history. He now attacked the church, not from without but from within. He transferred his throne from paganism to the Christian church. Instead of confrontation he resorted to infiltration. This was in exact fulfillment of St. Paul's prediction in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8.

"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day [Second Advent] shall not come, except there come a falling away [apostasy] first and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped so that he, as God, sits in the temple [church] of God, showing himself [posing] that he is God." 2 Thessalonians 2:3-5.

The power that fulfilled this prediction was the church at Rome. As one author has written,

"This compromise between paganism and Christianity resulted in the development of 'the man of sin' foretold in prophecy. That gigantic system of false religion is a masterpiece of Satan's power, a monument of his efforts to seat himself upon the throne to rule the earth according to his will. The church was induced to yield allegiance to the representative of Satan, the bishop of Rome. The same claim urged by Satan in the wilderness of temptation is still urged by him through the church of Rome and vast numbers are ready to yield him homage." (27)

Pergamos was the period of the visible formation and establishment of the apostate church, in other words, the predicted Antichrist. In this period commenced the great cleavage among Christians resulting in the withdrawal of the loyal minority of believers.

“Thou held fast my name and hast not denied my faith.”

In the words of the same author,

“After a long and severe conflict, the faithful few decided to dissolve all union with the apostate church if she still refused to free herself from falsehood and idolatry. They saw that separation was an absolute necessity if they would obey the word of God. They dared not tolerate errors fatal to their own souls, and set an example to their children and children’s children. To secure peace and unity, they were ready to make any concession consistent with fidelity to God; but they felt that even peace would be too dearly purchased at the sacrifice of principle. If unity could be secured by the compromise of truth and righteousness, then let there be difference and even war.”(28)

The Pergamene period undoubtedly began with the accession of Constantine the Great, the first so-called Christian emperor, and concluded, we suggest, with Justinian in 538 AD. This was the period of amalgamation of church and state. But this apostate church was not the church addressed by Christ under the name Pergamos. The true church of Christ was the separated faithful minority that held fast to Christ’s name and who, unlike their compromising brethren, did not deny the faith of Christ.

“In those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwells.” Verse 13.

Who was Antipas? There is a tradition that Antipas was the martyred bishop of Pergamos. (29) Probably the name has a symbolic application, just like Balaam and Jezebel in the Thyatira period. Anti as is formed of two words – “Anti” = in place of, instead of, meaning a substitute or one against or in opposition. “Pas” = an abbreviated form of pater or father. The use of the term “father” in the religious realm savors of authoritarianism and is contrary to the spirit of Christ.

“But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” Matthew 23:8-12.

With the development of the apostasy in this period there entered the unchristian spirit of authoritarianism. It developed markedly with the bishops of Rome and spread among other church leaders. Finally it infected the pastors and leaders of local churches. Antipas probably represents the faithful believers who stood firmly against the exercise of “kingly power” in the church and as a result were symbolically slain among the people. They were stigmatized, berated, and blackened. They were slain by character assassination and were forced to become social outcasts.

“The faithful few decided to dissolve all union with the apostate church.”

CHRIST’S COMPLAINT CONCERNING THESE CHRISTIANS

“Thou hast there, them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication” verse 14.

This is a reference to the experience of Baal-peor as recorded by Moses,

“And Israel abode in Shittim and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself to Baal-peor: and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.” Numbers 25:1-3.

“And Moses said to them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord.” Numbers 31:15, 16.

Baal worship is Sun worship. It is the worship of the principle of fertility and expressed itself in sexuality. This had a powerful pull upon the natural impulses of man and this is why Israel was so frequently led into Baal worship.

The Revelator draws on this experience to picture what was taking place in the Pergamene period with many of God’s professed people. Ancient Israel were led into literal whoredom and idolatry through Balaam’s counsel.

Spiritual Israel in the Pergamene period were led into spiritual whoredom by the counsel of certain false brethren within the church. These, it appears, advocated friendship and compromise with the apostasy of that day. God’s unequivocal counsel in this was clear:

“Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? Wherefore came out from among them and be ye separate-and touch not the unclean thing and I will receive you.” 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

The Pergamene church tolerated among them those who advocated compromise with false worship. This was the popular trend of the times and the church was lax in its stand. These false brethren were designated as Nicolaitaines.

“So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitaines which thing I hate.” verse 15.

A number of manuscripts render the clause, “which thing I hate”, as “in like manner”, suggesting that the Nicolaitaines held the doctrine of Balaam. (30)

The words “Nicolaitaine” and “Balaam” have almost identical meanings -

Nicolaitaine is Greek and comprises - conqueror and it “lais” - people = “Conqueror of the people.”

Balaam is Hebrew and comprises -”belang am” = “Destroyer of the people”

The Nicolaitaines are first mentioned in the Ephesian church letter.

“Thou hates the deeds of the Nicolaitaines, which I also hate.” Revelation 2:6.

But in the Pergamene period these same people were now right inside the church. This reveals the snare of tolerance. It is important for believers to learn what needs to be tolerated in the church and what should not. To tolerate what God hates is grievous to God and will injure the church.

What were the deeds and doctrines of the Nicoisitaines? They could be likened to the liberals of the early church. They abused St. Paul’s emphasis of “God’s free grace”. They misinterpreted “not under the law” to mean “not under the standard or direction of the law” instead of “not under the condemnation or curse of the law”. As a result, they adopted a false freedom which led to licentiousness or sexual freedom. As St. Peter declared:

“Having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls which have forsaken the right way and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.” 2 Peter 2:14-16.

“For there are certain men crept in unawares ungodly men, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness [sexual freedom] and denying the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. Woe unto them for they have gone in the way of Cain and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward and perished in the gainsaying of Core.” [Korah] Jude 1:4, 11.

The Nicolaitaines according to some scholars were Gnostics.

“The Nicolaitaines were a Gnostic sect who mistakenly traced their origin back to Nicholas, one of the seven deacons. [Acts 6:5.] They held certain impure doctrines and lived impure lives. They held to the pernicious principle that the lower passions were subdued by indulgence.” (31)

CHRIST’S WARNING TO PERGAMOS

“Repent or else I will come to thee quickly and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” verse 16.

Of what is the church of Pergamos to repent? Of tolerating the teachings and practices of the Balaamites or Nicolaitaines. How often has the church of God needed this warning? How often has the church become too tolerant? How often has it compromised? Today the church under the label of love, tolerates false doctrine, worldliness and commandment breaking. Those who protest are branded as trouble makers. But whom does Christ commend? Those, who like Antipas, lift up their voices in protest. But like Antipas they are spiritually assassinated in character and reputation.

“I will come quickly.”

This appears to mean that Christ will come to Pergamos in judgment and remove its candlestick if it does not repent. (See under Revelation 2:5.)

“I will fight against them with the sword of my mouth,”

This refers to the Nicolaitaines or Balaamites. The expression appears to be borrowed from Moses’ account of the experience of Israel in Numbers 25, where those who led Israel astray were literally slain with the sword.

“And Moses said to the judges of Israel, Slay ye everyone his men that were joined to Baal-peor. And behold one brought to his brethren a Midianitish women in the sight of Moses and all the congregation-who were weeping before the door of the tabernacle. And when Phinehas the son of Eleazar saw it, he rose up and took a javelin and thrust both of them through so the plague was stayed and those that died in the plague were twenty and four thousand.” Numbers 25:1-9.

This is a graphic warning to spiritual Israel. All who persist in compromising with the world, which is spiritual adultery (James 4:4) are to be dealt with by the spiritual sword of the Spirit - the Word of God - and severed from among God’s people. This is what will stay the plague of the judgments of God upon spiritual Israel.

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, was rewarded for his zeal by being granted the covenant of an everlasting priesthood.

“Phinehas has turned away my wrath from Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy behold I give to him my covenant of peace even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God and made an atonement for the children of Israel.” Numbers 25:10-14

In spiritual Israel, those who zealously resist the spiritual Balaamites, or Nicolaitaines, likewise will be rewarded, by being granted a spiritual priesthood for eternity. They will be made “kings and priests unto God.” Revelation 1:6.

THE PROMISES TO THE OVERCOMER

“To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the hidden manna and will give him a white stone and in the stone a new name written, which no man knows saving he that receives it.” verse 17.

The “hidden manna” is an allusion to the pot of manna preserved inside the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies of the sanctuary. Exodus 16:31-35. It was “hidden manna” because no one could see it in the ark except the High Priest maybe, and then only once a year.

It was incorruptible. It was preserved in the ark for 40 years in the wilderness and for over eight hundred years in the Promised Land until 586 BC approximately, when the ark and its contents were hidden by the prophet Jeremiah in a secret cave east of Jordan. (32)

It was food from heaven. It was all-sufficient. It gave life and it kept one free from disease. It represents the spiritual food of the believer (John 6:48-63) the word of God. This word is described in scripture as hidden.

“Thy word have I hid in-my heart that I might not sin against thee.” Psalm 119:11.

“I have meat [food] to eat that ye know not of.” John 4:32.

“I have esteemed [margin “hid, laid up” Hebrew] the words of his mouth more than my necessary food.” Job.23:12.

“Your life [spiritually] is hid with Christ in God.” Colossians 3:3.

This promise to the overcomer represents the fact that in the kingdom he will have provision to maintain life and health throughout eternity.

“A White Stone”

Undoubtedly this is an allusion to the Urim stone - a glittering diamond upon the breastplate of the high priest. Urim means light, which could answer to “white” in regard to color. On the Urim a secret name of God was written. Through the Urim stone special communication was available between the high priest and God. At the request of the priest, if the answer from God was in the affirmative a bright light would shine through the Urim.

“In the stone a new name written”

In the Old Testament the giving of a new name represented the bestowal of honor, promotion and elevation. When Joseph was elevated to be prime minister of Egypt, his name was changed to Zaphnath-paaneah, “The man to whom secrets are revealed.” (Genesis 41:45.)

When Daniel was elevated to stand in the king’s house, his name was changed to Belteshazzar. (Daniel 1:7.) When Jacob was elevated to

be a prince with God, his name was changed to Israel. (Genesis 32:27,28.)

To the overcomer this promise represents that he will be elevated to a distinguished position in the kingdom and that he will enjoy an especially close relationship with the Godhead - an access that is intimate and special. When one contemplates the multiplied millions of beings that surround the Father, such a promise is deeply significant. Because of his close and intimate relationship with the Godhead, the overcomer will obtain the hidden manna - he will share a spiritual feast.

In this earthly realm, to be invited to share an intimate meal with the king or queen or president of the nation, would be most precious and privileged. What then, in the kingdom, if one were granted an audience with the Father, knowing that he loves you and will enjoy your company? What anticipation! But do not we

have this privilege already in a spiritual sense? Yes! In secret prayer. In the kingdom we will have literal, visible fellowship with our heavenly Father.

The false prophet Balaam is typical of the apostate church in the period of Pergamos.

BALAAM

1. Balaam was once true to God.
2. Balaam was overcome by the spirit of covetousness - wealth.
3. Balaam was offered a rich reward by Balak, king of Moab, to ruin Israel.
4. Balaam finally fell for the reward and united with Balak.
5. Balaam was warned by a special messenger but to no avail.
6. Balaam counseled = "Lure Israel by an idolatrous feast and immoral pleasure."
7. Those who led Israel astray were slain with the sword
8. Those who refused to eat things sacrificed to idols etc. were saved and continued to eat of the manna from heaven.

APOSTATE CHURCH

1. The professedly Christian Church was once true to God.
2. The church was overcome by the spirit of covetousness popularity and power.
3. The church leaders were offered rich rewards by Constantine if they compromised, thereby ruining the church.
4. The church compromised and accepted the support of the civil power thereby uniting church and state.
5. The church leaders were warned and opposed by a loyal minority (Antipas) but to no avail.
6. Church leaders lured members from Christ by compromise with paganism which is spiritual adultery.
7. Those that lead spiritual Israel astray, Christ will fight against them "with the sword of his mouth".
8. Those who rejected the spiritual food of the spiritual Balaamites were saved from spiritual death and continued to eat of the hidden manna - the pure word of God.

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