

Truth for Today

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The Seven Churches of Revelation: Revelation 2:12-17 - Pergamos

Marriage

We have already seen the church at Ephesus forsaking her chief love - Christ (Revelation 2:1-7). Her name meant "desired", and she had been blessed with wonderful teaching concerning the purposes of God in Christ. Nevertheless, Christ lost the prime place in her heart. We then considered the church of Smyrna whose name signifies "myrrh" (Revelation 2:8-11). This is a substance having a bitter taste and generally speaks of the sufferings of Christ. So we find that Smyrna shared in these sufferings as she was persecuted for His name's sake. Nevertheless, she allowed Judaistic teaching to mingle with true Christian doctrine. So much so that it changed her into an imitation of a Jewish synagogue where Old Testament law tried to over-rule New Testament grace.

Now we come to Pergamos (Revelation 2:12-17) whose name means a "firm union" or "marriage". Prophetically, Pergamos signifies the time under Constantine where the church became united to the state. He became emperor of the West in AD 306. During his rule, Christianity was forced on the population and paganism was discouraged. So the Church, who should have been faithful to Christ, was married into the world whose very system was opposed to God. She had forgotten the warning: "Love not the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

The Angel

In Revelation 2:12, we read that this little letter was addressed to the angel of the church at Pergamos. The word "angel" means "messenger" and would suggest that the letter was to be sent to the responsible element in the church. These may have included messengers such as elders, prophets or teachers at that time.

The sharp sword with two edges

The way in which Christ presents Himself to the angel of the Church in Pergamos is suited to the condition of the Church at this period. The Lord presents Himself as "He which hath the sharp sword with two edges." (Revelation 2:12) This was a weapon which brought anguish and judgement. In fact, during Roman times, the sword was seen as the symbol of highest official authority. The "right of the sword" was almost equivalent to the power of life and death. It is fitting that the risen Christ holds this power. In Revelation 2:16, it is described as the "sword of His mouth". There it seems to represent the Word of God used in judgement. When God speaks, it is done! We see this in Revelation 19:15 where Christ smites the nations with the sword of His mouth. Hence, the overall impression of this passage is that Christ is ready to use the sword in judgement against those who are merely pretenders in that so-called Christian body - unless there is repentance.

Satan's throne

In Revelation 2:13, the Lord goes on to say, "I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is." The term "Satan" means "adversary". It reminds us that this being is the enemy of God. He is also the prince of this world (John 12:31, 14:30 and 16:11). It is small wonder that the earth is marked by violence, pride, immorality and idolatry. Therefore, his throne speaks of both the source and character of his rule. So, the church at Pergamos was situated in a most ungodly place, and her Lord was conscious of the peculiar difficulties and trials she faced.

Satan is also called the "god of the world" (2 Corinthians 4:4). He not only ruled the very world-system which was infiltrating the church, but also required its worship. The result was that this professing church (like Christendom today) settled down to live in a world dominated by Satan. By so doing, this church was displacing the true God and making Satan her king.

In, not of

In the prayer to His Father in John 17, the Lord Jesus prayed for His disciples (John 17:6-19). He spoke of them being in the world in the physical sense, but not of the world. Imagine a diver swimming in the depths of the ocean.

He is kitted out in a way which enables him to survive in an alien environment. He is there physically, but his true life is on the surface. So although we, as Christians, are here on planet Earth, our true life is in heaven where Christ is. The Church belongs to heaven and should bear a heavenly character. Just as the diver had specialist gear, so does the Christian. He puts on Christ in order to survive in an environment which is alien to his heavenly calling. Unfortunately, by settling down to live in this world and under its compromises, this church had given up her "pilgrim" and "stranger" character (1 Peter 2:11). She had not put on Christ (See Romans 13:14) and had even forgotten that He "gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil world." (Galatians 1:4)

The place of our pilgrimage

Furthermore, the Lord speaks of His disciples as those sent into the world, for He said to the Father, "As Thou hast sent Me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world" (John 17:18). He was sent as the Light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5) to be a witness for God. The One, who when on earth, could speak of Himself as "the Son of Man which is in heaven" (John 3:13), was no "earth-dweller". Indeed, He walked on this earth temporarily, but His real life was in heaven. Scripture makes it abundantly plain that the world is merely the place of our pilgrimage, where we are left for a time to shine as lights for God (see Philippians 2:15). Therefore, to dwell in the world is to attempt to settle down in this scene as if it were our permanent home. Sadly, this was the condition of the Church in the period of its history depicted in the address to Pergamos.

Many years before, angels had visited Sodom to testify against its wickedness. Lot lived there and, although declared to be righteous, he could not restrain its tide of evil, and his witness for God was extinguished. So we have to confess that having settled down in the world, the responsible Church today ceases to be a true witness for Christ, and the world ceases to persecute the Church.

From this period, the Church, as a whole, lost her heavenly character. Except for an expression of it in small pockets of Christianity, she would never regain her witness in totality throughout its history on earth. Christianity, in inverted commas, had simply become a form of respectability called Christendom. We could go further, in this day and age, and say that even Christendom despises itself, and the Lordship of Christ is displaced by the traditions and opinions of men.

Holding fast His name

Despite the failure of many at Pergamos, there was still that which the Lord could commend. He said, "Thou holdest fast My name, and hast not denied My faith." A name in Scripture always identifies who and, therefore, of what kind of character a person is. Holding fast His name means that they still stood up for Him as God the Son - yes, the Christ, the Son of the living God. The phrase, "My faith" refers to the great truths of Christianity concerning the incarnation, death, and resurrection of our Lord. Frederick Tatford quotes from William M. Ramsay's, *"The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and Their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse"* (ISBN: 9780543678423), in his book, called *"Prophecy's Last Word"* (ISBN: 9780720800296), "Tried in the proconsular court and confronted with the alternative of conforming to the state religion or receiving immediate sentence of death', they had still remained faithful."

The fact that the Lord highlights this shows that there had been an effort to get them to deny His name and the faith. Various cults surrounded them. These included: Arianism which denied that Christ was God; Appollinarianism that attacked His humanity; and Nestorianism which made out our Lord to be two Persons. These arose in the 4th century. The Church, by condemning these heresies in its different councils, held fast to the truth of Christ's Person. Some Christians of that time even laid down their lives rather than surrender the truth. Antipas was a bright example of one of those who remained steadfast. Apparently he was martyred by being locked inside a brazen bull which was then heated until red hot. We should always remember this when those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ knock at our doors. The name Antipas means "against all", and he certainly stood against all who would deny the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord commends him as "My faithful witness, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." (Revelation 2:13)

His faithful witness

Even though the Lord could no longer speak of the Church as a whole as "My faithful witness," there were, praise God, still faithful individuals. How encouraging it is for us today to know that the Lord recognises and values the faithful however great the general decline. He speaks of them as "His" and, not only as witnesses for Him, but as "faithful witnesses." In like manner, the Apostle Paul acknowledges the existence of such Christians during a time of ruin, because he charges Timothy to commit the truth to "faithful men" (2 Timothy 2:2).

The faithfulness of Antipas led him to die. He was a bright witness to Christ in Satan's world. He was a shining example of what the whole Church should have been in this world. The Lord's words, "he was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth" (Revelation 2:13) would cast a deep reproach upon the fallen Church. In his book, *"The*

Addresses to the Seven Churches”, Hamilton Smith writes: “It is as if the Lord said to the Church, ‘You live where Satan dwells, but My faithful witness died where Satan dwells.’” (Smith, H: *The Addresses to the Seven Churches: An expository outline*)

The teaching of Balaam

The Lord continues by outlining those things which He has against this Church. The first was that there were those among them who held the teaching of Balaam. The name Balaam means “swallowing up of the people”. He was a desperately wicked man. His history is found in Numbers 22-24. He was hired by Balak to curse the children of Israel. Balak means “waster” in the sense of “one who destroys”. Unable to assist Balak in destroying the people of God by curses, Balaam taught him how to bring about their fall by corruption. God had compelled him to utter words of blessing in which it was said that Israel would dwell alone and not be reckoned among the nations. It was this separation between Israel and the world that Balaam sought to break down. Therefore, the doctrine of Balaam may be summarised as “association with a world which is characterised by sexual immorality and extreme idolatry”. In order to earn “the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Peter 2:13-16), he taught Balak how to ensnare the children of Israel by breaking down this wall of separation.

Balak acted upon this advice. Instead of opposing Israel, he allowed them to settle in his land in a town called Shittim, in the plains of Moab (Numbers 33:49). Having settled there, the children of Israel fell into the ungodly and idolatrous ways of its people. In the same way, the Church which has settled down to dwell in the world adopts its ways. Individual Christians might have protested against such things, but most professing Christians no longer resisted these false teachers. It is sad to see that the Lord had to say, “Thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam.” Evil teachers were tolerated, and evil practices followed. As ever, bad doctrine leads to bad practice.

The doctrine of the Nicolaitanes

Furthermore, the Pergamos stage of the Church’s history was marked by those that held the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes. It is difficult to determine just who these Nicolaitanes were. There are two main thoughts. Some Bible students use the meaning of the name “conquering the people” to give an interpretation. For example, FW Grant believed that Nicolaitism was the rise and growth of a system of clergy and laity. (Grant FW: *Nicolaitanism: The Rise and Growth of the Clergy*) He argues that as a result of Judaism previously invading the church of Smyrna, a priesthood was set up where only certain priests ruled over the Christian assembly. In this case, the Nicolaitanes were a set of people officially appointed to be spiritual leaders, but lacking the spiritual power and conviction to lead the people of God. This is contrary to God’s thought as found in the New Testament and expressed by William Tyndale: “All believers are priests.” The Apostle Peter tells us that Christians form a holy and royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). Therefore, it is the responsibility of all Christians to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God and bear witness to the virtues of God. (Other scriptures indicate how, when and where this should be done, see Romans 12:1-2, and 1 Corinthians 12 and 14). Even those who were spiritual leaders in the churches, like elders, were to rule by example and not to be lords over their brethren (1 Peter 5:3). We remember the words, “One is your master, even Christ, and ye are all brethren” (Matthew 23:8).

The second thought concerning the identification of the Nicolaitanes is the one put forward by commentators like William Kelly and John Nelson Darby who believed that Nicolaitism was the flesh acting in the Church of God. (The “flesh” meant here, is that part of a person which always seeks self-glory, self-satisfaction and self-gratification). It seems that the Nicolaitanes were people who abused the grace of God. They would probably have said, “Let’s continue in sin that grace may abound” which was condemned by the Apostle Paul (Romans 6:1-2). It first showed itself by immoral deeds brought into the Church at Ephesus. These indecent deeds were hated and refused by that church. However, in Pergamos, this evil had taken a more subtle form, inasmuch as it now had its own form of doctrine. Probably, Peter refers to the teachers of this evil doctrine, when he warns the Church that “There shall be false teachers among you who privily shall bring in destructive heresies,” (2 Peter 2:1) and he adds, “Many shall follow their dissolute ways” (2 Peter 2:2). How the Lord hated this! Putting these problems together, we find that we have a debased church on the one hand, and the world wearing a veneer of respectability by the adoption of the Christian profession on the other.

Judgement

Warnings follow in Revelation 2:16. If there was no repentance, the Lord was coming to the Church, as a professing body, in the way of judgement, and that quickly. This was not the literal coming of the Lord to take those who really love Him to heaven, but a moral coming, in which the Lord would act as a judge against those who were degrading the Christian profession. The Lord did not say I will fight against “thee,” but against “them” (Revelation 2:16). If the Church no longer had power to deal with false teachers, and evil doers, the Lord, Himself, would act to cleanse out the evil and maintain the honour of His Name. This judgement would be with the sword of His mouth. The false teachers

would be both exposed and condemned by the Word of God. The Word, which gives guidance and assurance to those who obey it, becomes a sword to condemn those who despise its instruction.

An opened ear

There is then an appeal for the individual to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 2:17) This proves that the words given to the Apostle John were inspired, just like the rest of Scripture. How gladly we read in 1 Corinthians 2:13 that the things revealed to the apostles and prophets were relayed to us "not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Ghost teaches". The very words of Scripture are, indeed, God-breathed. (2 Timothy 3:16-17) However, it seems that only those with an opened ear would be prepared to accept the word.

Promises for the overcomers

Following this appeal to the individual with the opened ear, there is the promise of three things for the overcomer:

1. The hidden manna
2. A white stone; and,
3. A new name.

1. The hidden manna

The "hidden manna" refers to the manna that was placed in the ark of the Covenant for a memorial of God's goodness to Israel. (Exodus 16:33) The ark of the Covenant was a special box which was placed in the holiest place of the Jewish tabernacle or temple in Old Testament times. (Exodus 16:31-35) The manna was God's provision from heaven to feed Israel in their wilderness journey. It is an Old Testament type of Christ as "the bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:58). Hence, the manna pictures the Son of God come in Manhood. As such, He became acquainted with all that we have to face in a fallen world, apart from sin. Therefore, the hidden manna speaks of Him as being glorified in heaven where He is ever God's delight. He is no longer seen in humiliation. The privilege of the overcomer was to know that the One who entered glory, was once the One who faced the scorn and rejection of this hostile world - and was victorious!

2. A white stone

The Lord then said, "I will give him a white stone." (Revelation 2:17) There are a number of possibilities in the significance of this gift; but it most likely refers to the custom of placing a white stone into an urn in order to show approval of a candidate. It was a kind of voting system. A black stone would indicate disapproval. The stone itself bore the name of the candidate. It signifies the thought of the Lord giving the overcomer His approval. Sadly, the overcomer meets the rejection of people as he stands against the unholy alliance of the Church and the world; nevertheless, he should be encouraged by the thought of the Lord's approval as set forth in the white stone.

3. A new name

Moreover, in the stone there is a new name written. As we have seen, names in Scripture are not used simply to distinguish one person from another, but to set forth the individual character of a person. So the character which Christ sees and appreciates in the individual to whom He gives a white stone will be expressed in that new name. This shows us that the Lord values each faithful Christian. Thanks be to God!

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