

Revelation Chapter 2 v 8 to 17

Letters to Seven Churches – Smyrna and Pergamum

The second letter – to Smyrna (the ‘Persecuted’ Church)

Today Smyrna is called Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey. Smyrna possesses an excellent harbour and is surrounded by cypress-clad hills. First inhabited by the Hittites in 3000 BC, and later devastated by the Lydians, Alexander the Great ordered the city to be rebuilt in the 4th century BC.

Smyrna came under Roman control in 27 BC and promoted Caesar worship. Each year Roman citizens had to burn a pinch of incense on the altar, to acknowledge publicly that Caesar was supreme lord. This presented a vital test for the Christian, and many who refused perished.

In 166 AD Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, refused to recant: “Eighty and six years have I served the Lord Jesus, and he never did me wrong. How can I now blaspheme my King who has loved me so?” The old man was burned at the stake...

- The name ‘Smyrna’ is the Greek word for myrrh, which in turn comes from the Hebrew root word מָר (mur = death). In what ways is death the theme of this letter? How would the title Jesus used (verse 8) have been an encouragement to the church in Smyrna?
 - What were Jesus’ commendations?
 - What do you think is meant by “those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (verse 9)? See John 8 v 44.
 - What were Jesus’ concerns?
 - What were Jesus’ exhortations?
 - What did Jesus promise the faithful (verse 10), and “the one who conquers” (verse 11)? “Who is it that overcomes the world?” See 1 John 5 v 4, 5.
1. “Ten days” (verse 10) may be literal, or they may symbolise the ten Roman emperors responsible for severe persecution.
 2. “Crown of life” (verse 10) (στέφανος, *stephanos* = victor’s crown, or ‘wreath’) – five crowns are promised in the New Testament:
 - (i) the ‘crown of life’ for those who suffer for Jesus
 - (ii) the ‘crown of righteousness’ for those who long for his appearing (2 Timothy 4 v 8)
 - (iii) the ‘crown of glory’ for those who shepherd his flock (1 Peter 5 v 3, 4)
 - (iv) the ‘imperishable wreath’ (also στέφανος) for those who run well in God’s race (1 Corinthians 9 v 25)
 - (v) the ‘crown of joy’ for those who win others to the Lord (1 Thessalonians 2 v 19).
 3. “Second death” (verse 11) – see Revelation 20 v 6 and Jude v 12. Born once, die twice; born twice, die once.
- **Admonitory** (all churches) – persecution has been the experience of most of the Body of Christ, in most of the world, for most of the past 1,900 years.
 - **Homiletic** (personal) – see 2 Timothy 3 v 12.
 - **Prophetic** – this letter ‘fits’ the period of intense persecution by the Romans under a succession of emperors, from Nero (60 AD) to Diocletian (about 310 AD) – a period of some 250 years.

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The third letter – to Pergamum (the ‘Married’ Church)

The early history of Pergamum is obscure, and prior to Alexander the Great it was little more than a castle. Allied with Rome it became prosperous and the capital of Asia, before yielding to its rival Ephesus. Zeus is said to have been born here, and a great altar stood on a foundation some 40 m square set in a colonnaded enclosure (Satan’s throne, verse 13?) The centroid of paganism shifted from its original home in Babylon (after Cyrus’ conquest) to Pergamum, before moving on to Rome, where the pagan priesthood adopted Latin labels...

- The name ‘Pergamum’ comes from two Greek words, *περ* (*per* = mixed or inappropriate) and *γαμος* (*gamos* = marriage). In what way was Jesus’ title (verse 12) relevant to the situation in Pergamum?
 - What were Jesus’ commendations?
 - What were his concerns?
 - What was Jesus’ exhortation?
 - What did Jesus promise “the one who conquers” (verse 17)?
1. “Teaching of Balaam” (verse 14) included idolatry and immorality (Numbers 31 v 16), and symbolises marriage to the world.
 2. “White stone” (verse 17) – the meaning is obscure, but in Paul’s defence before Agrippa (in Acts 26 v 10) he says “I cast my vote against them” (i.e. the saints); the Greek literally says ‘I cast a small pebble against them’ – the Sanhedrin’s practice was to vote with small stones (black = guilty; white = not guilty), so the white stone here could refer to a favourable vote, or non-guilty verdict, for the person whose name is written on it.
- **Admonitory** (all churches) and **homiletic** (personal) – the dangers of spiritual compromise.
 - **Prophetic** – this letter ‘fits’ the 4th to 6th centuries AD, from the time when Constantine issued the Edict of Toleration that established freedom of religion (325 AD) before moving the capital of the Roman Empire to Byzantium (330 AD), and Theodosius made Christianity the State religion (c 390 AD), to the beginning of the papacy around 600 AD. Thus what persecution failed to accomplish, marriage to the world did – as the underground Christians exchanged the rags of oppression for the silks of the court...

Prayer –

Lord, thank you for these letters. Help us never to forget those suffering persecution for their faith in Christ. Help us to be aware of the dangers of spiritual compromise, and to love you with all our hearts. Amen.