

Revelation, Part 3

The Church at Smyrna

Rev 2:8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” ’

The second letter was addressed to Smyrna, a large and wealthy city 35 miles north of Ephesus. Like Ephesus, it was a seaport. In contrast to Ephesus, which today is a deserted ruin, Smyrna is still a large seaport with a population of about 200,000. The city was founded about three centuries before Christ by Alexander the Great as a major seaport for trade with the East. Extra-biblically the city was noted for its wickedness and opposition to the Christian Gospel, but even today about 1/3 of its population is Christian.

Smyrna means myrrh, which is a sweet perfume used in embalming dead bodies and as an anointing oil in the Temple worship of the OT (Exodus 30:23). It was a common perfume and mentioned as used by the bridegroom in Song of Solomon (3:6). Likewise, in Psalms 45:8 the heavenly bridegroom is described as using myrrh as a perfume. Thus this is a fragrance that is associated with Christ as the bridegroom of the Church as the bride.

Rev 2:8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life

We see Jesus Christ emphasize his deity and the fact that He suffered persecution greatly Himself. Yet in spite of the fact that He was killed, He is alive. Considering the message of persecution Jesus will deliver to this church in the following verses, this serves as a reminder to them that

things temporal are things temporary, and there is a greater future and blessing for the Christian than anything good or bad we may experience here on earth. He is saying, "Like Me, you will be persecuted and like Me you may be killed, and like Me, you will live in eternity."

Rev 2:9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich);

You will note that we find no word of condemnation here for this church, we will see only commendation. The word "works" does not appear in what is considered some of the more reliable manuscripts, and frankly, leaving it out emphasizes the most important attributes of this church. They were faithful even in the face of persecution. They had "tribulation" and "poverty". It is assumed the poverty came as a result of the tribulation that faced. The word used for "poverty" means extremely poor. During this attack, they evidently had all their possessions taken from them.

This church came under attack by Satan and his world order. Most expositors believe the church at Smyrna represents the church period covering from about the year 100 to about 300 when the church did suffer extreme persecution, mostly at the hands of the Roman emperors. Among the persecutions the various churches suffered included hundreds of Christians brought to the Coliseum in Rome to be fed to hungry lions while thousands cheered. Others were covered with animal skins and tortured to death by wild dogs. They were covered with tar and set aflame as human torches, boiled in oil, burned at the stake as was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. A church historian has estimated that about 5,000,000 Christians were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ during this period.

It is ironic that persecution tends to make the church stronger, which is what Jesus is suggesting here when He says, "But you are rich." They are rich in faith, which is mainly why they are commended and not charged with a spiritual failure.

Rev 2:9 ...and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Evidently the worst of their persecution may have come from the Jews who were traditionally the early Christians worst attackers. In fact the Jews were active in the attack on Polycarp that resulted in his martyrdom. While it may include the Jews, the term can be taken to be understood as

both Jew and Gentile were involved in this worship of Satan. The Smyrna Christians found no friends in the hostile world around them.

There were two basic heresies associated with this so called synagog of Satan. One was a false Gospel of Christ and the other was the mixing of Law and Grace. The latter was a product of the “Judaizers” Paul mentions in Galatians. Almost every false religion and cult system coming out of Christianity can be traced to these two heresies. Either people are confused about the deity, virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ and what exactly He accomplished on the cross regarding their salvation, or they attempt to mix the Law (works) with grace after salvation like the Judaizers taught. The church in the first three centuries successfully withstood these two insidious teachings, which today infect so many main line religions and cults.

Rev 2:10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Do not fear... easy to say and harder to accomplish. Literally it means stop being afraid. This present persecution was only a forerunner of what was to come. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.

There is lots of discussion of what this “ten days” means. Many take it as a literal 10 days and leave it at that, but if you stretch the interpretation of the seven letters to represent the Church Age you will consider other possibilities. Most take the position that the ten days is a term used for an unspecified period of time probably a lot longer than a literal ten days but still limited, and it is a symbolic number representing ten periods of persecution.

1. Nero AD 54-68
2. Domitian AD 81-96
3. Trajan AD 98-117
4. Marcus Aurelius AD 161-180
5. Severus AD 193-211
6. Maximinius AD 235-238
7. Decius AD 249-251
8. Valerian AD 253-260

9. Aurelian AD 270-275
10. Diocletian AD 284-305

Trials and tribulations have a tendency to strengthen the Church not weaken it. Satan did not understand this and his tactic failed. The Church became stronger. We will see him shift tactics when we look at the next church. Tribulation is a part of being a believer. We need to expect it and be prepared for it.

James 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Trials and tribulations are GOOD! We don't like to go through them because they get us outside our comfort zone and even into a danger zone where we can be mentally or physically hurt, even killed. They do serve a purpose and that is to allow us to build faith muscle and demonstrate our faith — our witness — before others. When asked to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's test was not for God's benefit. He knew how strong Abraham's faith was. It was first for Abraham to see his faith in action, building faith muscle, and secondly, for his "witness" down through history. Seeing that our faith produces results reinforces and fortifies our faith. You can expect to be tested. God will allow situations and threats to come into our lives as a part of living in a fallen world where we can choose to trust in our own abilities or in Him. Fail the test and you repeat the class. Pass the test and you will graduate to a higher and more difficult test. All along you are building faith muscle, which you will eventually need, especially if this country continues in the direction it is headed now. Trials and tribulations allow us to grow spiritually and become mature believers. As James says it produces steadfastness.

Rev 2:10 ...Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Be faithful even if it results in your death. Soon after this was written by John, Polycarp assumed the position of Bishop of the church in Smyrna. Evidently he had been the pastor. When asked by his heathen judges to recant his faith he replied, "Four score and six years I have served the Lord and He never wronged me. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

The Crown of Life

The popular statement, “You can’t take it with you” isn’t exactly true for believers. You can’t “take it with you” but we can store up treasures in heaven while here on earth. The Crown of Life is viewed by some as merely a reference to eternal life, but it is viewed here as a future possession — “I will give you...” and we know eternal life is a present possession. I am more inclined to read this as a special crown much like others mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, a reward for faithfulness even in the face of extreme adversity and persecution even to the point of death.

Crown of righteousness for a godly life.

2 Tim 4:6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. **7** I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. **8** Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Crown of glory for faithful shepherds

1 Peter 5:1 The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: **2** Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; **3** nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; **4** and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

Crown of gold for as evidence of our redemption

Rev 4:1 After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven. And the first voice which I heard was like a trumpet speaking with me, saying, “Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after this.” **2** Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. **3** And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. **4** Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

Crown of rejoicing for winning souls to Christ

1 Thes 2:17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. 18 Therefore we wanted to come to you—even I, Paul, time and again—but Satan hindered us. 19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

Incorruptible crown for self-control in the race of life

1 Cor 9:24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. 27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

The believer receives the crowns at the Bema judgment

1 Cor 3:9-15 For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building. 10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

But what happens to these crowns after that?

Rev 4:10 the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: 11 “You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created.”

The crowns are “cast ... before the throne”. Why? Because the one to whom they were awarded did not earn them through their own human efforts but rather through the leading and power of God (walking in the Spirit Gal. 5:16), thus it is God to whom the crowns rightfully belong.

The Letter to Pergamos

Rev 2:12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ‘These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: 13 “I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. 15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. 16 Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. 17 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” ’

The third church was in Pergamum or Pergamos, about 20 miles inland from Smyrna. Like Ephesus and Smyrna it was a wealthy city, but it was wicked. People in its pagan cults worshiped Athena, Asclepius, Dionysus, and Zeus, so Pergamos was deeply involved in idol worship. Pergamos was famous for its university with a library of about 200,000 volumes, which was sent to Egypt as a gift from Anthony to Cleopatra. It was also famous for manufacturing parchment resulting in a paper called pergamena.

The atmosphere of this city was adverse to any effective Christian life and testimony. The glory of Pergamos has long since vanished. There remains a small village named Bergama below the ruins of the ancient city. A nominal Christian presence has remained in this city to modern times.

Pergamos is called the church of compromise. In the timeline of church history, Pergamos is seen as representing the church from about AD

312-606, which is the period when the Catholic church really came into being and assumed control of Christianity through alignment with governing powers and the development of a church hierarchy, which is unbiblical and did not exist prior to this period.

Rev 2:12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ‘These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:

In previous letters Christ introduced Himself in special character.

- To Ephesus - Rev 2:1 He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands.
- To Smyrna - Rev 2:8 says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life.
- To Pergamos - Rev 2:12 says He who has the sharp two-edged sword.

This description was given to Him earlier in 1:16 and later used in 2:16; 19:15 and 21, and here it has added emphasis because of the use of the article before “sword” and each adjective in the original text. The sword is symbolic and represents two aspects: It separates believers from the rest of the fallen world, and it is an instrument of condemnation and judgment. It is the instrument of salvation, as well as the sword of death. A sword is seen elsewhere in Scripture, like “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” in Ephesians 6:17, and the Word of God is described as like a “two-edged sword” in Hebrews.

This is a picture of Christ the Savior and Christ the judge. The emphasis is on judgment as it is in Revelation 19:15 and 21, and the next few verses speak of judgment. Following the order established Christ begins with commendation.

Rev 2:13 “I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

“Your works” is not found in the better manuscripts and deleting it, as in the letter to Smyrna, adds emphasis to the concept of their dwelling place. The term “dwelling place” is used here as a reference to a lifestyle. They “live” where Satan lives. One of the prominent buildings in Pergamos was a temple to Esculapius, also called Asklepois, a pagan god whose idol was

in the form of a serpent, and some see the reference to Satan as referring to this, but that is doubtful.

The expression is “Satan’s throne” and not the “serpent’s throne,” although Satan is sometimes associated with a serpent. Satan is present and active in idol worship. More than anything this verse is a reference to satanic power. Satan is active in all periods of church history and successful in varying degrees. For the church at Pergamos, he will distract the church into compromising its faith and causing it to align itself with secular government and, like the pagans of Pergamos, get involved in idol worship.

It is not clear who Antipas was, except the Word of God tells us he did not compromise. He remained faithful even unto death, and that probably took place in Pergamos — he “was killed among you”. It is clear that at least for a period of time, they did “hold fast to His name” and Antipas is held up as an example for them. They were faithful to the Word for a period of time, and this should be viewed as during the early period when the church was emerging from persecution rather than later in the history of Pergamos.

Rev 2:14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.

Now comes the rebuke for their failings. Two blots are recorded against this church: The first is they held the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. The second we will examine in a moment

We have to go back to the OT to understand this issue with Balaam. In Numbers 22:25 the prophet Balaam was hired by the kings of Midian and Moab to curse the Israelites who were wondering in the wilderness under Moses. Their numbers posed a threat to them. Balaam went along with the scheme as far as he was able but refused to curse Israel, which was under blessings from God. He offers the kings a solution. Make friends with the Israelites and allow them to intermarry with your women. In Numbers 31 we see Moses angry at the children of Israel because they did not exterminate the women of the Midianites, which they were told to do by

the Lord. Instead they took these women as their wives. God frowns on marriage outside the faith, and Israel was instructed not to take wives to themselves from other nations. This was designed to perpetuate racial purity among the Jews, but more importantly to avoid the pagan religions of these heathens from adulterating the system of faith God had established for Israel. God understood how easy man is drawn to idol worship.

When Moses met the returning army he was angry when he saw the Midianite survivors. The Midianite women, he said, should have died because they were directly culpable in Israel's sin at Baal of Peor. All the women except the virgins were then sentenced to death along with all the boys. This insured the extermination of the Midianites and thus prevented them from ever again seducing Israel to sin.

What about this sin of Peor? Peor - The name of a mountain peak (Num. 23:28) to which Balak led Balaam as a last effort to induce him to pronounce a curse upon Israel. The tribes of Israel are described as being visible from the peak, but Balaam refused to curse them and continued to offer blessings (24:1-9). Peor is similar to the Egyptian Pi-Hor ("House of Horus"), a reference to a divinity who was worshipped at that mountain peak, and, biblically, was the subject of the heresy of Peor, the divinity worshipped by the Moabites and is biblically referred to as Baal-peor (Num. 25:3,5, 18; comp. Deut. 3:29), literally meaning the Baal of Peor.

An ancient Aramaic inscription identifies Balaam as a prophet of Shamash, a semitic sun-god, and consequently, it could well be the case that the unidentified Baal of Peor is Shamash. If Peor's connection to Pi-Hor is factual, then the Baal of Peor may be the Egyptian god Horus.

The "doctrine of Balaam" is the teaching that the people of God should intermarry with the heathen and compromise in the matter of worship. The "way of Balaam" is the selling of his prophetic gift for money. The "error of Balaam" is his assumption that God would curse Israel.

Intermarriage with the idolatrous heathen of Pergamos was a problem for the Christians there. Religious life and social life were so entwined that separation was difficult if you had any kind of social or business contacts. This is a danger we face today. We may be Christians but we must function in a heathen world that may not share our values. The problem

comes when we begin to compromise our values to find acceptance. Practically all meat in Pergamos had been sacrificed to idols, and we understand from elsewhere in Scripture that eating meat sacrificed to idols is not an issue for a believer. It was difficult for the Christians of Pergamos to associate socially without being drawn into the city's system of pagan worship. Evidently, the Pergamos Christians began to observe rituals associated with idol worship in their desire to "fit in". They didn't just eat meat sacrificed to idols but they began to partake of the feasts themselves. Slowly, Satan drew them away from their true faith into one co-mingled with idol worship. This intermarriage and intermingling socially, destroyed the integrity of the church at Pergamos.

Rev 2:15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

We saw this cult of Nicolaius back when we looked at the church at Ephesus. The name means "conquering of the people". They are thought by some to be forerunners of the clerical hierarchy superimposed on the laity (people) and robbing them of their spiritual freedom — legalists. Others believe they may have been a licentious sect advocating complete religious freedom in Christian conduct, including participation in heathen feasts and free love. According to early church fathers, this sect was started by a man named Nicolaius of Antioch, a Jewish convert who apostated. Christ strongly condemns such acts of abomination and spiritual impurity. The key thought is not the sin itself but the idea of apostasy — deviating from the true faith.

The Nicolaitans were apostate in their beliefs in that they adopted error as truth. The Ephesians were commended for rejecting this apostasy, but the Christians of Pergamos embraced it!

And this is also what happened historically to the church. With the so-called conversion of Emperor Constantine the time of persecution ended, which the church had previously endured. It was replaced by a period when the church was favored by the government. The edicts or persecution were repealed, and Christians were allowed to worship according to the dictates of their conscience. Near the end of the fourth century one called Theodosius actually proscribed paganism. Under these conditions it soon became popular to be a Christian, resulting in

questionable conversions. Was it for real or for convenience to be part of the new “in crowd”?

During this same period evangelism became conversion by force and not free will and faith. The government conquered heathen tribes and forced conversion on them and demanded that the chief be baptized and become a “Christian” whether he actually accepted Christ or not. Along with the chief the entire village would be also baptized. As a result paganism was brought into the Christian church, often as a way to make these new converts feel comfortable. They were used to icons and idols, but where were the icons and idols to the apostles and early church martyrs? This is how idols in the form of icons and statuary became part of church furniture and eventually church worship. The people represented by these icons and idols were venerated and eventually worshiped like mini-gods. This is when Marion worship entered the church system and the hierarchy we know as the Roman church emerged as a ruling body of all things spiritual in the church.

When Constantine moved the headquarters for the empire from Rome to Constantinople, this created a power vacuum in Rome that the bishop of Rome readily stepped into and assumed supreme power. Prior to this there existed not true church hierarchy. The local church had been independent and larger cities had a bishop, who were equals among equals. That changed under Constantine when the church in Rome assumed authority over all Christendom and got away with it. The church and government merged and the church was the loser for it, as the conscience of the church became blurred. Compromise with worldly morality and pagan doctrine was prevalent in the church, especially in the third century when Christianity became popular.

Compromise with pagan morality and departure from biblical faith soon corrupted the church. During this period, like the church at Pergamos operating in a heathen environment and eventually embracing it, the church in history compromised itself by accepting the “blessings” of the government and adopting heathen practices — the apostasy of the Nicolaitans. That which Ephesus hated, the church at Pergamos embraced and adopted to the point of spiritual apostasy. As a result the church lost its hope for the soon return of Christ. Biblical simplicity was replaced by complicated church organizations which substituted human creeds and the worship of idols for true Biblical doctrine. The church committed the

same sin Israel committed. Israel intermarried with the Midianite pagan women and soon their faith was mingled with heathen idolatry. The church married the heathen government and embraced heathen practices, and soon its faith was like Israel, steeped in idolatry.

Rev 2:16 Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

Repent, have a change of mind, or else I will come quickly. There is no sense they have time — “I will come quickly.” Apostasy can take a long time to come, but correction must be immediate. All forms of the apostasy must be rejected now, not gradually over time. There is no slow process of repentance. It is a choice followed immediately by action, otherwise you face divine discipline — “I will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” And the weapon that is most effective against apostasy is always truth. The Word of God is a two-edged sword, it separates believers from the world and judges unrighteousness.

Rev 2:17 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” ’

Again we have this call for victorious action — Listen! To the overcomers will be given to eat of the hidden mana and get a white stone with a special name on it.

The hidden mana is believed to refer to a closer and even more intimate relationship with our Lord. Mana was given to Israel in the desert as food for their bodies and it demanded faith, as they were to gather only what they needed for the day and depend on God to provide more tomorrow, except for the Sabbath rest day when they were to gather an extra portion the day before. Our hidden mana is the Word of God that nourishes our souls as the mana of the Israelites fed their bodies and sustained them.

The white stone with a secret name on it has a number of possible meanings, but one seems to fit best. If you were ever a member of a secret fraternal organization you probably participated in a secret ballot, usually for the purposes of determining membership eligibility. A box with two compartments is passed around. The outer compartment is open and

contained black and white marble balls. There was another covered compartment that has a hole for inserting the voting ball. A vote of acceptance is white and one of rejection is black. Someone who gets even one black ball vote is said to have been “black balled” and is ineligible for membership. This system dates back many centuries and is probably what is being referred to here. The white ball represents acceptance or being declared judicially righteous

The secret name is a bit more uncertain. We know many of the apostles were given new names by Jesus, as was Abraham and his wife Sarah, but their names were public. This secret name suggests a closeness of relationship with Christ and probably special privileges associated with the victory.

The church at Pergamos fell into spiritual compromise like the Nickolaitans and eventually went into spiritual apostasy when they watered down the truth by incorporating pagan practices in their worship. They became idol worshipers like the pagans. This follows the pattern of the church in history as it compromised itself by incorporating pagan practices into its worship. Eventually both the church at Pergamos and the one in history lost its witness and its identity to become just like the pagans in its system of worship.