

SMRYNA AND PERGAMUM: THE PRESSURED CHURCH AND THE COMPROMISING CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

It has been often said, with much truth, that Christians ought to live with the newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other. It takes one to understand the other. The newspaper records the visible events that are taking place upon the earth at the present hour, but the Bible looks beyond to the invisible realm where the councils of God determine what will take place on earth. You cannot really understand life until you see both realms.

It is especially the province of the book of Revelation to open that invisible realm to us. As we look at this great book, we will learn much about what is to happen on earth, as well as what is happening right now. The latter is covered by the letters to the seven churches. The entire church age is brought before us in the purview of these letters. To fit these seven letters into the assigned time period that I have it is necessary for me to take two of them today. So, forgive me as we move quickly through two letters: The letter to the church at Smyrna and the letter to the church at Pergamum.

The first is to the angel of the church at Smyrna. Smyrna was a beautiful city located on the coast about 40 miles north of Ephesus. It was one of the most prosperous cities of Asia. With typical Chamber of Commerce humility the city fathers called it "the pride of Asia." It sounds like San Francisco, does it not? There was a hill named the Pagos back of the city, and around the crest of that hill a number of pagan temples, forming a rough circle, had been erected. Because it looked like a crown, Smyrna was also called "the Crown of Asia." That will explain a reference we find later in this letter.

The city was one of the major centers of emperor worship. As early as 26 A. D., during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, a temple had been erected to the emperor, and thus the Christians of Smyrna were confronted with the need annually to choose between saying, "Jesus is Lord," or, "Caesar is Lord." That was the test the Romans applied to all their citizens. It meant that a great deal of pressure and persecution came upon this church because of their unwillingness to say "Caesar is Lord." There was also a large community of Jews within the city who were hostile to the Christian faith, as we will see.

To the church in this city of Smyrna, then, the Lord Jesus addressed these words:

"These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty -- yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." {Rev 2:8b-10 NIV}

That is our Lord's appraisal of this church. It is obviously a church in trouble. The name Smyrna means "myrrh." It is a very fitting name because myrrh is a perfume, the fragrance of which is released by crushing. Here was a church that was being crushed through persecution. It was tough to be a Christian in Smyrna because they had to live constantly between two extremes. There was within the church a rich and loving fellowship which must have greatly warmed their hearts and strengthened their faith, but outside, in the city, they faced continuous cruel and persistent hostility. Thus, the Christians of Smyrna lived within these two extremes.

But notice how the Lord reveals himself to them. He says, "I am the First and the Last. I am the one who died and who lives." Those are extremes: First and last; death and life. Jesus presents himself as the Lord of the extremes. He encompasses all the forces and events between these two extremes. Remember that at the giving of the Great Commission he said to his disciples, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given unto me," {cf, Matt 28:18 KJV}. He is Lord of all heavenly and earthly forces. It must have been a great encouragement

to the Christians at Smyrna to receive this word from their Lord.

There is an ascending scale of troubles harassing the church. The first thing the Lord says is, "I know your afflictions." The Greek word means *distresses*. It is a picture of crushing, unending pressure upon them. We can best understand what that would be like if we remember what we have read about the Holocaust in Germany, and the continual pressures that the Jews faced daily under the Nazi regime. Every day they were hounded and harassed on every side. They were humiliated and attacked without mercy. It is the kind of distress these Christians in Smyrna were enduring. Perhaps we could update it a bit by likening it to the suffering of the churches of Eastern Europe under the hard-line Communist regime.

The second thing Jesus says is, I know your poverty: "I know your afflictions and your poverty -- yet you are rich." We do not know exactly what made them poor. Smyrna was a prosperous city, but it may have been that this poverty was caused by the persecutions they were experiencing. Their homes perhaps had been pillaged; their possessions taken away. This was common in the early church in times of persecution. Perhaps they had to resort to menial work, and to eat cheap food to get by. Yet the Lord says their fellowship within the congregation and their families was rich indeed.

I well recall in the Great Depression, when I was a high school boy, that we did not have much to eat. We had no luxuries. We could not afford to buy anything but the most basics; even clothing came with great difficulty. But we had a wonderful time together without any special entertainment. We did not have television; we had radio, but where I lived radios were battery operated and used sparingly. Yet we had a wonderfully rich time. I look back on it as one of the richest periods of my life, because we enjoyed each other. We learned again the simple joys of relationships and of family fellowship. Someone has captured the thought of this in a poem I ran across:

I counted dollars while God counted crosses.
I counted gain while He counted losses.
I counted my worth by the things gained in store,
But he sized me up by the scars that I bore.
I coveted honors, and sought for degrees.
He wept as he counted the hours on my knees.
I never knew till one day by a grave,
How vain are the things that we spend life to save.
I did not yet know, 'til a Friend from above,
Said, richest is he who is rich in God's love!

There is a program on television called "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." On it, there is paraded before us the wealth and luxury seemingly enjoyed by the rich. But if you investigate more closely the lives of those presented, you discover that it is very rare to find a happy person among them. Riches do not make one happy. Fame does not make one happy. A continual testimony to that fact is borne by the tragedy of these people taking their own lives out of sheer wretchedness and misery.

But our Lord says the true riches are those that come from within, where the heart is filled with the grace and love of God. There is an experience of close relationships with other people; they become dear and precious to us. That was the experience of the church at Smyrna.

Thirdly, Jesus says, "I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." There was a smear campaign going on against these Christians. Lies were being told about them. We know from early literature that, because the Christians talked about eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, they were accused of being cannibals. People thought of them with horror as cannibals, eating one another. You can imagine the reaction that brought upon them. Also, because they refused to visit the pagan temples, or to acknowledge the gods of the pagans, they were called atheists. Consequently they were treated with scorn in this world given over to idolatry. Christians talked often about being members one of another and of loving one another, and so they were accused of sexual orgies. Lies were spread about them that when they met together it was to indulge in licentious and lascivious practices.

This slander is what produced much of the persecution of the early Christians. It came, we are told here, from false Jews. These were physical descendants of Abraham and they had a synagogue there in Smyrna, but, like the Pharisees who harassed and hounded Jesus, they persecuted these believers, proving they did not have the spiritual insights of Abraham. They were, in effect, "a synagogue of Satan" and were far removed from being true children of Abraham.

It is hard to bear up under slander. I watched recently an interview with Dr. Everett Koop, the former Surgeon General of the United States, and also an interview with Judge Bork who was denied a seat on the Supreme Court. Both of these men testified to the difficulty and pain they suffered from the lies and slanders that were told about them. They were vilified in the public press. They were accused of things they had nothing to do with, and this was hard for them to bear. That is what these Christians were facing.

I read once about a Christian who was going through a time of great misunderstanding and attack, and he could not do much to defend himself. One day a friend of his came up and took him by the hand and told him how much he sympathized with him for what he was going through. But, looking him in the eye, he said, "Remember, they have not spit in your face yet." It was a reference, of course, to Jesus. They did spit in his face. They smote him. They plucked the hair from his beard. They beat him on the back with rods. They lied about him. So Christians who endure mistreatment and misjudgment must remember that the Lord knows what it is like.

But the worst is yet to come. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you." This, by the way, is the first mention of the devil in the book of Revelation. The Lord acknowledges that he who is the First and the Last is going to allow this to happen. The devil will put some of them in prison. Those Roman prisons were terrible places where prisoners were faced with the threat of execution at any moment. But our Lord says three very encouraging things. If you ever have to face this kind of persecution here are three things to strengthen you:

First, "You are going to be put into prison to test you." The emphasis ought to be upon the word *you*. Many read this as though it is God who is the one who is going to learn something by this test. But that cannot be, since God already knows our hearts. He knows what you can take before you ever have to endure it. He does not learn anything new from your testing. But you do! It is to test you that this hardship is given. It is to show you how much you have grown. It is to strip off the superficial supports that you have been leaning on and to show you how much you have truly learned to rely upon the grace and the strength of God.

Then, second, he says it will be only for a limited time. He is going to test you "ten days." We do not know when or how this took place though it undoubtedly did occur to this church at Smyrna, but the encouraging thing is that the Lord determined the limits. The test cannot go beyond it. No force or power on earth could make this last eleven days! It was ten days that he had determined.

Third, he says, "Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life." Surely that is intended to be a contrast to the Crown of Asia, the pagan temple buildings that were built on the hill of Pagos. That was an earthly crown, a recognition of earthly status, and a source of great pride to this city. But our Lord says that he will give something much better -- a Crown of Life, of eternal life. What a much greater thing that is! The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans that "the sufferings of this present moment are not to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us," {cf, Rom 8:18}. In another place he says, "This light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us to produce an eternal weight of glory," {cf, 2 Cor 4:17}. We are constantly encouraged by the fact that these trials and testings and pressures are doing something valuable to us.

Prophetically viewed, this church is a picture of the period in history from about 160 A. D. to 320 A. D., the rise of Constantine, the first so-called Christian emperor. The whole period has been termed the "Age of the Martyrs." It was not the only time Christians have been martyred. (I have often pointed out that the greatest number of Christians put to death for their faith was not in the 1st century but in the 20th! That is rather startling, is it not?) But, in this first period, they were persecuted in ways almost beyond belief. Their bodies were torn apart on racks. Their fingernails were pulled off. They were hung by their thumbs, oftentimes for days. They were wrapped in animal skins and thrown out for bulls to gore and to pitch around. They were

covered with tar and set alight in the gardens to light the festivities of the pagans. If you want the gruesome details get a copy of *Fox's Book of Martyrs* and read what some of the early Christians went through.

One of the first was a man named Polycarp who was the bishop of this very church at Smyrna. In 155 A. D., at the age of 86, he was sentenced to death by being burnt at the stake for his faith. He had refused to say, "Caesar is Lord." When he died he gave an eloquent testimony to his love for Christ. The account of it has been preserved for us in *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. In his teens he had known personally the Apostle John, and had probably heard from his lips the truth recorded here in Revelation.

During this period of time there were ten separate edicts of persecution from the Roman emperors. It is predicted in this phrase that the Christians would "suffer persecution for ten days." Historically, there were ten separate persecutions, beginning with the Emperor Domitian in 96 A. D., and continuing to Diocletian, the last emperor before Constantine. This is prophetically portrayed for us here in this remarkable preview of the church age.

Now, in Verse 11, our Lord appeals to the individuals in this church:

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. [Notice in all of these letters what is said to all the churches is to be heeded in each.] He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." {Rev 2:11 NIV}

If you look up in your concordance what "the second death" refers to, you will find in Chapters 20 and 21 of this book of Revelation three references to the "second death." There we are told plainly what it is: It is the terrible lake of fire, the symbol of the final judgment of the impenitent, those who refuse the gospel of the grace of God. It is prepared for the devil and his angels, but it will be shared by those who choose the devil's way. They will be separated forever from God, tormented in spirit and soul, pictured by the torment that fire gives to the physical body. It is what they have asked for all their life! People who say, "I don't want anything to do with God, I don't want him in my life," eventually are given their way. For the rest of eternity they are separated from the grace, mercy, and love of God. It is the most horrendous torment the human spirit can bear. It is vividly symbolized by the burning lake of fire called "the second death."

Jesus is here simply saying, "If you listen to what this letter is saying to you, if you trust me in times of pressure and persecution, I will give you the gift of eternal life and you will have nothing to fear from the judgment of God." You will be kept safe forever from the second death. It is what Paul rejoices in in Romans 8, "Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord," {Rom 8:38b-39 NIV}.

By the way, all Christians are called to be faithful unto death. Did you know that? We are all called to be faithful unto death no matter when or how that death comes. This may sound startling to you, but I have always thought the best way to die as a Christian is to be beheaded! If I were to choose my style of dying it would either be by a sudden heart attack or by being beheaded. It is quick! It is sure! And I believe it would be virtually painless! There is nothing to fear. So Jesus reassures those who prove the reality of their faith by remaining faithful unto death.

Now the church at Pergamum:

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

"These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live -- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city -- where Satan lives.

"Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those

who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." {Rev 2:12-16 NIV}

This church is in sharp contrast to the church at Smyrna. Smyrna was enduring persecution; this church was faced with enticement and corruption. The devil has only two ways of approach. If he cannot make you knuckle under with hostility and persecution he will begin to entice you and lure you into something dangerous. It is either intimidation or enticement. It is either the violence of a roaring lion or the corruption of an angel of light. Pergamum is the church that is being undermined by corrupt practices and corrupt teaching.

Our Lord identifies himself to it as the one having "the sharp, doubled-edged sword." As we have already seen, that is the symbol of the Word of God coming from his lips. It is double-edged; it cuts two ways. I believe that refers to the fact that the Word can cleave the skull to get to the mind, and it can pierce the heart to touch the emotions. It can awaken us to reality. By the Word of God our minds begin to learn truth that we never saw before. We see things the way they are, and it motivates us to action. It can also pierce the heart.

Remember that on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter had finished his message, the people were cut to the heart, according to the book of Acts. They cried, "Men and brethren, what must we do?" {Acts 2:37 KJV}. That is the power of the Word. It touches both the reason and the conscience.

Pergamum was the Roman capital of the province of Asia. Located about 50 miles north of Smyrna. It was a center of pagan worship and there was a temple to Caesar there as well. It is called here, "where Satan has his throne," i.e. the place where Satan rules. And it is also referred to as the city "where Satan lives," i.e., where he has his headquarters. Many scholars think that refers to the great altar of Zeus which was on the hillside overlooking the city. It was a great chair, or throne, forty feet high, and any citizen could look up there at any time and see what Jesus calls "Satan's throne." This was such a center of pagan worship it seemed to be the very center of evil.

There is a fascinating footnote of history in connection with this. In the 1880's, about 100 years ago, a German archaeologist working in the city of Pergamum removed that throne, that Satanic seat, from the hillside and took it to Europe. Today it is visible yet in the Pergamum Museum in the city -- get this -- of East Berlin! For 100 years Satan's throne has been in East Berlin. If that has any connection with the rise of Hitler, and the Nazis, I leave to you to judge. But East Berlin is also where Hitler's headquarters were located.

In his appraisal, our Lord assesses the strengths of this church:

He says, first, "You remain true to my name." They had refused to budge on their view of his person. They held to the truth about Jesus. They saw him as the God-man, combining in one person two natures, both of God and man. That is orthodox doctrine. That is the teaching of the church from its very beginning, and clearly evident in the Scripture. Against all the corrupting influences around them, these people had held to that truth. Almost all heresies today flow out of a denial of the deity of Jesus. But we must not also deny the humanity of Jesus. He was God as though he had never been man, and man as though he was never God. Both are true. The church at Pergamum had held fast to that teaching.

Second, they did this at the risk of their own lives. Jesus says, "You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city -- where Satan lives." Antipas means "against all." We do not know much about this man, although he is said to be the first martyr under the Roman persecution in Asia. Tradition says he was roasted to death in a brazen bull that was heated to a white heat. That is the price that he had to pay for being true to the doctrine about Jesus. He had to stand "against all!"

But two terrible errors were undermining this church:

One is called here "the teaching of Balaam." You can read about it in Numbers 25. Balaam was a false prophet who had been hired by Balak, the King of Moab, to curse Israel, but when he tried to do so he found he could not. Every time he tried to curse them, words of blessing came out of his mouth. God would not let him curse

his people. So, in order to achieve the end for which he had been hired, he paid beautiful maidens from Moab and Midian to parade before the young men of Israel, tempting them into sexual immorality. Since these women were worshipers of idols, by that means he introduced idol worship into the tribes of Israel. Thus he corrupted and enticed them into sin. The counterpart we face in our day is the practice of pornography and fornication among Christians and the acceptance of unmarriages, of living together without marriage, that is often widespread in the churches today. That is the error of Balaam.

They were also being seduced by the error of the Nicolaitans. Though it is difficult to know exactly who these people were, the name means "conquerors of the people." It appears they claimed to have a special relationship to God. They professed to be the beneficiaries of intimate revelations that were not given to others, and that they therefore had an inside track with God. They presumed to take the place of the priesthood in Judaism, and carried that error into the Christian church. Probably both of these false teachings worked together. One appealed to physical lust, and the other to the ambition for power exercised in a religious way. It is seen yet today in the supremacy of pastors who are lifted up above the laity. They are men who claim to have more intimate relationships with God, and thus are regarded as better than the rest of the people. The way you handle either error, of course, is with the sharp, two-edged sword! Jesus said, "Repent. Otherwise, I will come to you and fight against them with the sword of my mouth." The Word of God exposes both the error of immorality and the error of priestly superiority. That is one reason why the exposition of Scripture is resisted in many churches.

Prophetically, this is the period from the accession of Constantine in 320 A. D. to the rise of the papacy in the 6th century. During that period of time were held the great councils of the church. The council of Nicea, the council of Chalcedon and others, determined the true doctrine of the person of Christ -- who he was, and how he combined in himself the two natures. But it was also the time of the wedding of the church and the world under Constantine. (Incidentally, Pergamum means "marriage." It comes from the same root from which we get *monogamy* and *bigamy*). Constantine was not really a true Christian. He adopted many pagan practices and brought them into the church where they were accepted. Christianity was popular in those days, and many pagan practices were incorporated into it. This began when the church was viewed as a worldly kingdom, like any other kingdom.

Our Lord's appeal is found in Verse 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. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." {Rev 2:17 NIV}

This is addressed to those who will take heed to the warnings of this letter, and watch in the areas of sexual immorality and of spiritual superiority. If you stand fast against immorality and the love of religious power you will be given the "hidden manna." Notice both the manna and the new name are secret things. It is a picture of close intimacy. Manna, of course, was the food that Moses fed the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus said in Chapter 6 of John, "I am the bread sent down from heaven," {cf, John 6:41}. He is that hidden manna. He is food for the inner spirit, food that others do not know about. In John 4, our Lord sent his disciples into the city of Sychar to get food. When they came back and found he had been ministering to the woman at the well, he said, "I have had food that you know not of," {cf, John 4:32}. He was feeding upon the inner strength that God the Father was giving him. That is what is given to those who will resist the lure of immorality and spiritual privilege.

Then, with it, is the white stone with a secret name upon it. White stones were used among the Romans as a mark of special favor. A secret name, of course, is a sign of intimacy.

Some years ago the well known Christian author, Elizabeth Elliott was speaking here at PBC. For a while I called her Betty Elliott because that was the name used in the book that she wrote about her husband Jim. One day she corrected me. She said, "You know, my name is not Betty, it is Elizabeth. Betty was Jim's private name for me." It was apparent to me that she wanted to preserve it as his name for her alone. So I began to call her Elizabeth instead of Betty.

A secret name is a special mark of intimacy. If you know the Lord Jesus, and your heart is kept from the corrupting influences of the world around, you will enjoy an intimacy with him in which the new nature he has given you (depicted by the new name here), becomes stronger and more developed, and you enter into beautiful fellowship and intimacy with him.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for your mercy and grace to us. Thank you for teaching us so plainly and clearly in these letters what we are to face up to. Help us, Lord, to heed what the Spirit says to the churches. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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