

UPON THE ROCK

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THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

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Upon the Rock is published monthly for the purpose of setting forth sound biblical material concerning first-principles and evangelism. We strive to print articles that are informative for Christians and non-Christians.

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The Church at Ephesus

A.J. Cox

Revelation chapters two and three contain the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. Although the Apocalypse was addressed specifically to these seven churches there is no doubt but that this is a revelation for all of Christ's churches. It is helpful to bear in mind that in the initial vision given to John, which is recorded in chapter one, Jesus is represented as dwelling in the midst of the churches (Revelation 1:10-20; 2:1). Whereas this would serve as great consolation for the faithful, the unfaithful would find this to be a most unsettling arrangement. Christ is fully aware of the condition of every congregation and every individual member (1 Chronicles 28:9; Psalm 139:1-12; John 2:24-25; Acts 1:24; Hebrews 4:13). This is, in fact, a keynote of His messages to the seven churches (Revelation 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). Seeing as the Lord possesses such intimate knowledge of His people He is supremely qualified to evaluate, commend, censure, and counsel them. Every church of Christ should evaluate itself in the light of Revelation chapters two and three and resolve to make whatever changes are necessary to bring itself into full compliance with the will of Christ.

The Church at Ephesus

Few first century churches received as much attention and instruction as the church at Ephesus. This was no doubt due, in part, to the fact that Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor. Paul came to Ephesus on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18-21). He later returned and labored in Ephesus for at least two years (Acts 19). Apollos, Aquila and Priscilla, and Timothy all worked in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-28; 1 Timothy 1:1-3). On his way to Jerusalem Paul called for the elders of the church at Ephesus and met with them at Miletus (Acts 20:15-38). He would later write an epistle addressed specifically to the saints at Ephesus (Ephesians 1:1). While the church at Ephesus was one of the most thoroughly taught of all the churches of the New Testament period it was not without its problems, as will be demonstrated in this study.

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

- 1 Hear THE WORD OF GOD - (Romans 10:17; Matthew 7:24-27).
2. Believe THE WORD OF GOD - (Hebrews 11:6; Mark 16:15-16).
3. Repent OF YOUR SINS - (Acts 2:38; 17:30; Luke 13:3).
4. Confess THAT JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD - (Matthew 10:32,33; Acts 8:36).
5. Be baptized FOR THE REMISSION OF YOUR SINS- (Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-4).
6. Live faithfully unto death - (Rev. 2:10).

Perhaps the saddest thing about the lukewarm Christian is that he does not realize his true condition and the fatal results that await him. If he truly realized it, he would do something about it. We may be able to fool others, but Almighty God knows our true condition.

There Is Hope

Why would Jesus be so pointed and graphic in His appraisal of the church at Laodicea? “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent” (Revelation 3:19). There is still hope; “I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see” (Revelation 3:18). Jesus uses an illustration that the Laodiceans would know about; the eye salve developed in their town. To a man who could not see because of a physical condition of the eye, the eye salve would be very valuable to him. To a Christian who could not see because of a spiritual condition, he must consider the medicine (God’s word), apply its teaching to himself until he can fully see his pitiable and sinful condition.

There is still hope for you, dear friend. Apply the medicine to your spiritual condition. Have you obeyed the gospel of Christ by hearing (Romans 10:10); believing (Mark 16:16); repenting (Luke 13:3); confessing (Matthew 10:32,33); and being baptized (Acts 22:16)? Or perhaps you have already done these things, but have allowed yourself to slip into mediocrity. Apply the medicine and rededicate yourself to the One Who saved your soul.

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www.upon-the-rock.org

Please be patient with us as we build up
this website.

The Lord’s Commendation

As was stated earlier, the Lord knows the works of every person and certainly of every congregation. In the Lord’s evaluation of the church at Ephesus there is much that is worthy of imitation and praise (Revelation 2:2-3, 6). The church at Ephesus was not an inactive congregation, but rather a working body of believers. They recognized that faith without works is dead being alone (Matthew 7:21; James 1:22-25; 2:14-26). These brethren had been steadfast in difficult circumstances and had not fainted. Evil and wicked men could find no sanctuary there for they were intolerable of such. They particularly found the deeds of the Nicolaitans detestable and loathsome. Finally, they tried those who were masquerading as apostles and exposed them as liars.

Does this not sound like an exemplary church? If the Ephesus church of Christ was a 21st century congregation it would likely have many successful “work programs.” These brethren would be involved in numerous evangelistic endeavors. They would have a vibrant benevolent outreach. Members of the Ephesus church of Christ would regularly attend every bible study and worship period. They would give liberally. They would be “inviting people to church,” and they would be baptizing people. This church, when necessary, would be withdrawing fellowship from the unrepentant. This congregation would be defending the truth and exposing error and those who are its proponents. And what’s more, this church would continue to do all of these things even in the face of persecution and tribulation. What a church! Given the Lords commendation, one might think that this was the ideal church. How peculiar, then, are the Lords words of censure found in Revelation 2:4-5.

The Lord’s Censure

In spite of the many stellar qualities possessed by this church which were previously considered, the church at Ephesus is known primarily as “the church that left its first love” (Revelation 2:4). One might think that the commendation of Revelation 2:2-3, 6, and the censure of Revelation 2:4 could not possibly be in reference to the same group

of people. This was, however, the penetrating evaluation of the all-seeing Lord. Whereas Paul had previously praised the church at Ephesus for its love (Ephesians 1:15), by the end of the first century its love, particularly for the Lord, had waned. “But how,” someone asks, “could this church be doing all of those things previously mentioned, and at the same time have left its first love?” Perhaps in the same way that a husband and wife who have “fallen out of love” continue to do all of the things that they did when they first married. The husband still goes off to work each day and works hard to provide for his wife, and the wife still has breakfast ready before he leaves in the morning and dinner on the table when he gets home at night. They still sleep in the same bed together, and they still wear the rings on their fingers that they exchanged those many years ago. They still smile when they have their family portrait made, and they still go out for a nice dinner to celebrate their anniversary. The difference is that whereas they used to do those things because they were so much in love with the other, now they do those things because they have forgotten how to do anything else. It is their habit and they are simply going through the motions.

In short the church at Ephesus was suffering with a heart problem. They were still doing all of the things that they were doing when they first fell in love with the Lord and became Christians, but their hearts were no longer in it. They were simply going through the motions, or as some have described it, they were just “playing church.” The Lord has never been satisfied with empty rituals and mere formality. He was not then, and He is not now. The Lord has always required that men love Him with all their heart, all their soul, and with all their mind (Matthew 22:36-38). When a motivating love for the Lord ceases to be present in a church it is usually just a matter of time until the works cease as well.

The Lord’s Counsel

The Lord’s remedy for heart trouble is found in Revelation 2:5. The first thing that this church needed to do was to reflect, and meditate upon the love and zeal for the Lord that had characterized their relationship with Him at the beginning of their Christian journey. They needed to remember how it felt when they were in the “honeymoon stage” of their relationship with Jesus. This would produce the “godly

To be hot would mean that they were fervent in their zeal for God’s service. One can easily understand why it would be better and more pleasing to God that the church in Laodicea was “hot” in service to the Lord, but why the Lord would prefer their being cold, rather than lukewarm, is more difficult to understand.

Hot or Cold

The word cold in this passage is the Greek word *psuchros*, which literally means “cold, or chilled, or chilly,” and appears in only one other place (Matthew 10:42) when Jesus was talking about a cup of cold water. The word hot is the Greek word *zestos*, which occurs only here and means “to boil, be hot, fervent” Chilled water is good for something, usually drinking. And hot water has a purpose, such as baths, purification and others. Lukewarm water, however, is not useful.

It is doubtful that Christ is using the word “cold” here to say that He wishes that the church was completely against the cause of Christ and hated Him. Although it would have been better for them never to have believed, then to hear and obey the gospel of Christ, only to turn their backs on the Lord (2 Peter 2:20-22). It is more likely the case that Jesus is using the two extremes (ice cold and boiling hot) to emphasize their complacency. “A hot or cold beverage might refresh; but a tepid, insipid, lukewarm liquid produces only nausea and vomiting” (Homer Hailey in *An Introduction and Commentary Revelation*, p. 158).

Why the Lukewarm Sicken Christ

“So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:16). A lukewarm Christian will do the church more harm than the most devout Atheist. The tepid Christian says one thing, but lives another thing. He allows his pride to think that he is good enough on his own, and that he can forsake the Lord’s work to rest on his past deeds. The Atheist at least does not try to hide his true feelings, but rather shows what he truly is. The insipid Christian tries his best to hide his true colors.

Background

The city of Laodicea was located in the Lycus valley, eleven miles west of Colossae. The valley was known for the production of clothing made of fine quality wool. Additionally, there was a famous school of medicine near Laodicea. This school invented and produced a powder from Phrygian stone renowned as a cure for diseases of the eye.

The chief water supply for the city was obtained from hot springs some distance away. An ingenious system of cubical stone blocks, bound and cemented together, piped the water into the city. However, by the time the water reached its destination it was not hot enough for health baths, nor cool enough for drinking. Those who did drink it were only made sick. (Dan Flournoy in *The Book of Revelation*, Spiritual Sword Lectureship, October 1998, Jim Laws Director).

“I Know Thy Works” (Revelation 3:15)

As was said to the other churches, the Laodiceans were told that Christ knew their works. Whereas the church in Philadelphia received only praise from the Lord, the church in Laodicea received only censure. What could give one a greater sense of security than to know that God sees all that we do? When we are suffering, God knows our cares and sorrows. Also, when we do good, God sees this. He told the church in Philadelphia, “...For thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (Revelation 3:8). Reward is pictured by our Lord like this: “Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in” (Matthew 25:34-35). The Lord took notice of the good that they did.

On the other hand, the fact that God sees all should cause those who are unfaithful to their Lord to consider their position. The church at Laodicea is encouraged to do just that “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16).

sorrow” necessary for the next phase of their rehabilitation (2 Corinthians 7:9-10). The second step in their healing process would be to repent, that is, to resolve to change and to do whatever is necessary to return to that former bliss. Finally, they must “do the first works,” Many have rightfully pointed out that this was not a call for these Christians to go back and be baptized again, or any such thing. Rather, this was a call for them to return to the things that they were doing when they first believed, and to the way in which they did them, with passion, zeal, and without weariness. Such is the prescription for every congregation, and indeed every person, that has fallen out of love with the Lord.

Finally there is a word of caution for the church at Ephesus. If they were to disregard the Lord’s censure and fail to enact the changes necessary to bring themselves into compliance with the will of Christ there would be severe consequences. The Lord would come and remove their candlestick, which is to say, they would cease to be a congregation of the Lord’s people. 21st century churches of Christ would do well to remember that Jesus is still in the business of removing candlesticks when necessary. Yes, the sign out front may read “Church of Christ,” the doors may be open, cars may be parked in the parking lot, and people may be sitting in the pews. But if a congregation falls out of love with the Lord and persists in that course of action, it will die, and the Lord will withdraw His presence. Sadly, in time, this befell the church at Ephesus.

A Call to Hear

A call to hear is issued to every church and every individual in the closing lines of the Lord’s message to the church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:7). This is a call for self-examination in the light of the foregoing words. This is a call to heed the Lord’s counsel and to reform accordingly. This is a call for those who have fallen out of love with the Lord to change before it is too late. Will you heed that call?

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UPON THE ROCK LECTURESHIP

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Theme: The Whole Armor of God

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The Church at Smyrna: Rags to Riches

Patrick Morrison

Though a study of the book of Revelation may leave one bewildered and confused, there are many lessons from this marvelous work that ring loud and clear. As one studies the letters to the seven churches of Asia in chapters two and three, he cannot help but see that here is a pattern for the church as God would have it to be. Sure, there were problems in most of these congregations, but that is to be expected from the human standpoint. Christ commended those things that were good and right in each congregation, and condemned those things that needed to be changed and corrected.

The church at Smyrna is a rags-to-riches story. Along with the church at Philadelphia, Smyrna received no criticism from the Lord, only commendation for holding fast to their faith. The city of Smyrna was one of the oldest in the Roman Empire, having very early on given their allegiance to this rising world power. She became one of the “eyes of Asia” and prided herself in being the light and ornament of that region of the Roman Empire. At the time of the writing of the book of Revelation, Smyrna numbered about 200,000, and was rivaled in Asia only by the city of Ephesus. Because of her longstanding fidelity to Rome, Smyrna became the center for emperor worship throughout the entire region. From a commercial standpoint Smyrna was a very wealthy city, having two natural harbors and being located at the crossroads of many important Roman travel routes. The city of Smyrna boasted of her great wealth and prominence among the great cities of Rome. It was in the midst of this opulence and idolatry that the Lord’s church survived and thrived. Let us notice

Our Lord wrote this letter to this church to encourage them to hold fast to what they had, so that no one would take their crown (Revelation 3:11). It is possible to lose our reward by yielding to the influence of temptation (James 1:13,14). Jesus wanted them to know that what He was going to do would shortly come to pass. And those that would overcome He would make them pillars in the temple of God (Revelation 3:12). He would bless their steadfastness by writing the name of His God upon them. He would write on them the name of the city of His God. What a blessing it is to wear the name Christian. It brings glory and honor to the one who gave us this name. It is also comforting to know that the Lord knows those who are the faithful. “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and , ‘Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity!’” (2 Timothy 2:19). God knows His children by name and will come for them to take them to their reward. We must be ready for when that day will come.

The Lord closes the letter like He did the others by challenging them to hear what the Spirit had revealed. The New Testament is a system of faith, which requires us to hear what the Lord has said and obey His will. Jesus said on a number of occasions, “if you love me keep my commandments”. If we have ears we are to hear and do what he says. This is the challenge to the church today!

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Laodicea—A Lukewarm Church

Mark Reynolds

If you have ever heard the term, “You make me sick,” then you understand the Lord’s description of the Laodicean church. They literally made the Lord sick to His stomach. She was not censured for following false teachers or for leaving her first love. She was condemned for being complacent.

have access to the Father. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Without Him there is no salvation for our sin sick soul.

Jesus is the holy and the true and He has the key of David to open and that no one can shut (Revelation 3:7). This has reference to Isaiah 22:22 “The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; So he shall open, and no one shall shut; And he shall shut, and no one shall open”. Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth Matthew 28:18. He has the authority to open the door of opportunities for this church that no one could shut. Because of their faithful works He set an open door that no one could shut. Even though they were little in strength, they had kept His word (Revelation 3:8). The church in Philadelphia was located in an ideal location to spread the gospel. Because the city was built to spread the Greek culture the Lord used this to help spread His word. The New Testament was written in the Greek language. So the church had a great opportunity to spread the gospel in that area. Even though they were little in strength and perhaps limited in finances. The Lord opened the door that no one could shut. The Lord uses the little things to accomplish great things in His kingdom. This church was faithful when it was very unpopular to proclaim Christ. The Lord knew their faithfulness and blessed them for their efforts by opening the door for them. This is a much needed lesson for us, that our Lord knows His children and their faithfulness. Let us take courage from this fact and remain steadfast in the work of the Lord.

The next great lesson we learn is that God bestows favor on His church because of their faithfulness. This favor consists of two things, (1) He would make those of the synagogue of Satan to worship at their feet (2) He would keep them from the hour of trial (vv.9,10). God is with His church and will bless those that follow His will. He made the promise that He would not forsake nor leave us (Hebrews 13:5,6). God does not promise to shield His people from persecution, but has promised to be our helper. God’s people should not have the spirit of fear, but have their minds focused on living right and bringing glory to God. Let God do His part in bringing down the enemies of God to worship at the feet of His saints. I am convinced that we worry about too many things of which we have no control. We need to seek God’s help and allow Him to do His will.

the Lord’s commendation of the church at Smyrna as recorded in Revelation 2:8-11.

The Lord took note that the church at Smyrna was physically poor, but spiritually wealthy. Though the city of Smyrna boasted of great material riches, those who had obeyed the Gospel and had been added by the Lord to the church (Acts 2:47) did not enjoy the same physical blessings as those in the world. As a matter of fact by renouncing the idolatry that surrounded them, and putting their trust in the true riches of heaven, the Christians in Smyrna lost much of their material wealth. They likely lost their jobs, for most workers belonged to a guild of those of similar trade, and each guild generally worshipped a particular god or goddess. Many also lost their homes, and likely were counted as outcasts by their own families. The Christians of Smyrna essentially lost all of their earthly possessions. It was this poverty that the Lord took note of. He realized their destitute situation, the price these had paid in order to be faithful to Him. These had counted the cost (Luke 14:28) and determined that faithfulness to the Lord was more important than all of earth’s riches. By their obedience to the will of God, and their washing in the blood of the Lamb, they came to know true riches. Herein is why the Lord could say, “But thou art rich.” These had laid claim to the riches of the abundant life (John 10:10), of every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3), and the hope of eternal inheritance in heaven (1 Peter 1:3-4). These precious saints in Smyrna had been assaulted upon every front. The pagan Gentiles had no use for the Christian’s one God, and the Jews despised them for supposedly selling out to a false Messiah. Christ renounces these false Jews, those who were Jews in name only. The Israel of God today is the church (Galatians 6:16), and those who are true Jews are those who have obeyed the will of God (Romans 2:28). Though Jews by physical birth and culture, these who blasphemed the good name of Christ and maligned His church were really of the synagogue of Satan.

The Lord prepares the saints at Smyrna for even further persecution. As if the situation were not bad enough already, Christ warned the faithful Christians at Smyrna that their plight would get even worse. Just because these humble, penitent souls had obeyed the Gospel, it did not make them immune to the trials and tribulations of life. Some would be cast into prison, falsely. Some would be tried in myriad other ways. Still others may be called upon to pay the ultimate

price—giving their lives for the cause of Christ. However, Christ reassures them that their tribulation will not last long. He states that it will be for 10 days (a figurative expression, with 10 representing completion). Their suffering would be complete after a time, but the assurance is that it would end. The message may at first seem like unwelcome news to those who are already suffering. But, the Lord intends these words to bolster their faith and steadfastness. His words to the saints at Smyrna are, “Hang on just a little while longer.” For those who have their sights set on heavenly things, the sufferings of this life pale in comparison to the glory that we shall share in eternity (2 Corinthians 4:17). These Christians were looking beyond this vale of tears into the bliss of an eternal day. They were prepared for any persecution that might befall them, for they had their eyes firmly fixed on heaven.

The Lord then addresses the prize for persevering. One of the great verses in all of Scripture is Revelation 2:10. In our time, it has taken on a different meaning. We generally read this verse and think if we are faithful until we die of old age, then we shall have the crown of life. But to these persecuted saints in Smyrna, who were threatened with death at every turn, this message meant even more. We might need to read it after this fashion, “Be thou faithful even to the point of death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” Christ tells the church at Smyrna to be faithful to the cause of Christ even if it means that these must give their lives! Such was the attitude of three remarkable Hebrew youths—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who defied the command of king Nebuchadnezzar. They knew that God could deliver them from the fiery furnace if He so chose. But even if God did not choose to spare them, these three would still be faithful to His commands rather than to give place to the ranting of some mere mortal! God expects us to have a similar attitude toward the faith in Christ. The reward is far too great, the consequences far too severe, for one who would abandon the religion of Christ for any reason, even to the saving of one’s physical life. Remember the words of our Lord, “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 10:39). There was a price to be paid, but there was a prize to possess. If we will pay the price of faithfulness under any circumstances, we will possess the prize of an incorruptible crown of victory!

Christian do if he finds himself on a similar course? Remember. Repent. Hold Past. Watch.

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The Church in Philadelphia—The Church With An Open Door

Larry Reynolds

The city of Philadelphia was located 20-30 miles southwest of Sardis. It was built in the second century by Attalus II. He named it Philadelphia in honor of his brother Eumenas. The name is a combination of two root words. The first word gives rise to our word brother, the other to our English word love. Thus Philadelphia was labeled as the city of brotherly love. The city was also referred to as the “little Athens” because it had many temples of idolatry. It was built to spread the Greek culture and language.

There were important factors in the life of the citizens of Philadelphia which seem to have been related to the lessons taught in the letter to this church. Philadelphia was located in what was then, and still is, an earthquake prone region. It was also a major gateway of trade. We shall see that the Lord used each of these characteristics of Philadelphia to teach impressive lessons they needed to learn.

This letter begins by Jesus as describing Himself as the one who is holy and true (Revelation 3:7). The word holy means separated. Jesus was separated from sin. He lived His life perfect in every way. The Hebrew writer says, “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He will give a great tribute to our Lord in the seventh chapter when he said, For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (Hebrews 7:26,27). Not only was Jesus holy, but He was also true. “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me’ (John 14:6). He is the key to

REPENT

“Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent” Tragically, repentance is one of the most misunderstood, least explained and least practiced aspects of Christianity. Some of this is the fault of overly anxious preachers who rush folks into the baptistery without proper preparation. Some of it is the fault of people who want the benefits of Christianity, without the demands of discipleship. The Lord is quick to point out that repentance is not optional in God’s plan of salvation or revival. “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3). “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30). Repentance is much more than just sorrow over sin. The sorrow of sin leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:8-11).

WATCH

“Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief.” We must always be on guard, always be watchful if we are to prevent ourselves from drifting again. The Scriptural evidence of this principle is overwhelming when considered. “And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed” (Romans 13:11). “Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame” (1 Corinthians 15:34). “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13). “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). “Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober” (1 Thessalonians 5:6). “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5).

The intention of these verses has been to overwhelm the reader with proof that God’s recipe for revival is both Scriptural and effective. Some will scoff at the simplicity of His plan, but what more needs to be said? The church at Sardis was drifting. They had not totally fallen away, but they were on a slippery slope. What can an individual

Finally, the Lord promises these precious saints at Smyrna protection. He does not speak of protecting them from the trials and sufferings that men would bring upon them because of their faithfulness to Christ and the church. Rather, he speaks of them not being harmed at the second death. If there is a second death, there must then be a first. The first death is the common lot of all men, physical death (Hebrews 9:27). There is not a person now living who will escape physical death save for those who are alive when the Lord returns. We all must walk this road. However, we do not have to experience the second death. This has reference to eternal separation from Almighty God. Those who have given their lives in service to the Lord, living faithfully for Him no matter the cost, will have nothing to fear when standing before the judgment bar of God. To these blessed Christians in Smyrna, who may very well be called upon to experience the first death by gruesome means, Christ promises they shall not be hurt of that second death. For those who would give their all for the Master while here upon the earth, God lovingly invites to the joys of their reward (Matthew 25:34). Sadly, far too many will have no protection from this second death, for they will have squandered any and every opportunity to make their lives right with God before their time upon earth is through.

What will it be for you? Will you pledge your life to the Lord in humble, loving obedience? Will you live faithfully for Him each day, no matter the cost? If so, you will possess the crown of life when you put off this mortal coil, and you will dwell in the presence of God for all eternity, never to be separated from Him, His Son, His Spirit, and the redeemed of all the ages!

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Pergamos: The Church in Satan’s Hometown

Phil Gear

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, *even* where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you,

where Satan dwelleth. But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; to him that overcometh 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 knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”

Pergamos had a hometown celebrity, but not one of whom to be proud. They were said to live “where Satan dwells” (Revelation 2:13). It is interesting to think of a church located in what might be considered Hell’s headquarters.

Pergamos was the center of Emperor worship in the Roman province of Asia. It was the home of the council responsible for making sure that all who lived in that province burned incense as worship to the Emperor at least once a year. The people of Pergamos were proud of this, and guarded this distinction jealously. They felt obligated to set a good example for the rest of the Empire, and resented local residents who refused to participate in this idolatrous practice. So when Christians insisted upon worshipping only God they found themselves in conflict with not only the Roman officials, but also the populace of their own hometown. Christians would have been viewed as unpatriotic, disloyal, and treasonous to the Roman Empire. The overwhelming distrust and hatred this generated would have made it very difficult for Christians. But Jesus said of them, Thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.” No amount of opposition could provoke them to deny their faith in Jesus. We learn two very valuable lessons from these dedicated servants of God.

We Can Be Faithful to Jesus

Some excuse their unfaithfulness to Christ on the grounds of difficulty, “I get so much opposition from my family.” “The place where

The foundation for our Christianity is faith. “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). How do we strengthen our faith? We go back to the beginning of our faith, the Word of God. “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). While some might scoff at this as being too trivial or merely putting a band aid on a hemorrhage, the Bible teaches that if the foundation is faulty whatever is built thereon will not stand (Matthew 7:24-27). Although the admonition to remember may seem trivial to some, consider the fate of those who refuse to do so. “But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins” (2 Peter 1:9).

HOLD FAST

“Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast.” What exactly does it mean to hold fast or be steadfast? Consider a man who is attempting to swim upstream in a river. He is going against the current. The easiest thing to do would be to just let the current take him wherever it is going. Being steadfast requires him to continue to swim against the current. When he stops swimming (does not hold fast) he begins to drift away. Steadfastness is not the same as stubbornness, but rather it is being grounded, stable and unwavering in doing that which is good and right. All of the Bible is clear concerning the need to remain firm in your convictions, to be steadfast. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58). The recipe not only tells us to hold fast, it also tells us the areas in which we are to hold fast. “Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). “Holdfast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13), “But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Hebrews 3:6). “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)” (Hebrews 10:23).

the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (James 5:19,20). But what about the brother who is drifting? He may still be attending faithfully, and he may not be engaging in sinful behavior, at least publicly. Because of this, most of his brethren, if not all of them, will never know his condition until he is gone. Although he may be present in body, his zeal has waned, his conduct is relaxed and his faith is faltering. Sadly, most people will never see these things and certainly will not realize their brother is in need of help. When a Christian is drifting he has to be the one to turn things around and draw near to God.

What if I realize that I am drifting? What can I do? How can I return to God, restore my zeal and strengthen my faith? If we find ourselves asking these questions we can take comfort in knowing that we are not alone. We are not the only ones to have these questions, nor are we the first to feel that we are gradually slipping away. To help us reverse our course, God has given us a recipe for revival. This recipe was prescribed for a congregation that had been drifting for a long time.

Concerning the Sardis church of Christ, the Lord said, “I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God” (Revelation 3:1-2). This congregation was not the strong and lively church that it appeared to be to the naked eye. The all seeing eyes of the Lord knew the whole story. Perhaps they had not fallen away completely, but Sardis was certainly drifting and the Lord offers them this recipe for revival.

REMEMBER

“Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard.” The Lord begins by calling them to go back to square one. They needed to start over and begin again with what we would consider the first principles. This “advice” was almost identical to what He said to Ephesus. “Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works” (Revelation 2:4-5).

I work is so wicked; it’s hard not to get caught up in it.” Certainly such can make faithfulness difficult but the Christians in Pergamos show us that it is not impossible.

Very few of us are ever called to suffer persecution as they did, and yet they held fast to Jesus’ name even “in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you”. Persecution was not an abstract hypothetical situation to them. One of their own, Antipas, had been killed for his faith. He literally had been faithful unto death (Revelation 2:10). Death was no idle threat to these Christians. Antipas would not be in worship next Sunday, which surely caused them to ask, Who would be next?”

We can be faithful in spite of opposition. “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). You never face a spiritual battle you cannot win with God’s help. We need fewer excuses and more determination, conviction, and faith.

We May Not Compromise the Truth

The determination of those in Pergamos to be faithful is impressive, but not everything was perfect Jesus said, “I have a few things against thee” (Revelation 2:14). They had faithfully resisted Satan’s attacks from without, but were succumbing to his attacks from within. They were tolerating the false teaching of two different groups—the Balaamites and Nicolaitans. The Balaamites taught that Christianity was a license to sin, and so were teaching God’s people to “eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication” (Revelation 2:14). The Nicolaitans had been rejected in Ephesus (Revelation 2:6), but were accepted in Pergamos.

The Christians of Pergamos were determined to reject false religion, but apparently were not so concerned about compromising their moral convictions. Such compromises would make them more acceptable to the world, but that is not what matters. We are told that the world will never understand us. Peter wrote, “Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking

evil of *you*" (1 Peter 4:4). We may not compromise God's teachings just to please and impress the world.

Jesus minced no words in expressing his opinion of these false teachings. He called the doctrine of the Nicolaitans that "thing which I hate", and warned that he would come "quickly" and, "fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (Revelation 2:15-16). That "sword of the Spirit" is our only weapon we have to fight the false teaching that would corrupt God's church (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16).

The threat to the church from within is usually the most deadly because it can be difficult to spot. But cancer can kill as surely as a gun shot. False teachers cannot be ignored.

Jesus promised three wonderful blessings to those who overcame Satan. They would be given (1) hidden manna, (2) a white stone, and (3) a new name. Manna was God's provision for his people in the wilderness. A white stone and new name implied acceptance and approval. Those who overcome Satan will receive God's spiritual provisions and his acceptance. Surely, no right-thinking person would want to miss out on these wonderful blessings.

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The Church at Thyatira

Jim Bullington

We know almost nothing of the origins of the church in Thyatira. However, we can know a few things about the Thyatira congregation at the time of the writing of the Revelation. This is no ordinary letter in that it was spoken by Jesus and transcribed by John. Like the other six letters, it was addressed to the angel (messenger) of the church. We can glean several application lessons from the letter to the saints of Thyatira.

Recipe For Revival: The Church at Sardis

Brandon Britton

Despite the false claims of denominationalism that falling away is impossible, warnings against apostasy are some of the most frequently and fervently repeated warnings in Scripture. "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall" (2 Peter 1:10). "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Perhaps the most graphic and explicit warning comes from 2 Peter 2:20-22. "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire." What purpose would these verses serve if it were not possible for a child of God to fall away and be lost? Their presence in the New Testament clearly proves that Christians can fall from grace (Galatians 5:4).

While these verses warn against falling away, there is also another danger that precedes this condition. Usually it is the case that a person does not "fall away" all at once, but rather begins by simply "drifting." The Bible also warns us against the weakening of our faith. "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip" (Hebrews 2:1). The American Standard Version translates the latter half of the verse, "lest haply we drift away from them." In some ways drifting is a more dangerous condition because you retain the appearance of faithfulness externally. Those who fall away are absent from the assembly or are worldly and immoral in conduct. When a brother is in this condition it is noticeable and is the responsibility of other Christians to seek to restore him. "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from

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Thyatira was an industrialized city and a centre of commerce. The city probably did not number more than 100,000 during New Testament times so it was not among the largest population-wise. It was home to several trade guilds, organizing at least 6 or 8 specialized trades which were prominent in its commerce and industry. Paganism and the gods of paganism figured heavily in the Gentile culture at Thyatira though there was some Jewish influence. The carnal influences typical of paganism (sexual immorality and the free satisfaction of sensual appetites) were present and even flaunted in Thyatira. Unless one belonged to one of the trade guilds and participated in their ungodly practices, it was difficult if not impossible to succeed in business in Thyatira. The only specific biblical person we know associated directly with the city of Thyatira was Lydia. She was a business woman of considerable means and influence who was converted by the preaching of Paul in the outskirts of Philippi (see Acts 16.11-15). The influence of the Thyatiran culture on the church was a real issue among believers, people like Lydia excepted. Not everyone gave in to the culture, but unfortunately, many did. As a matter of trivia interest the letter to Thyatira is the longest of the seven letters in the Apocalypse.

Unique Positive Comment about Thyatira

"I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first" (v19). Thyatira was not a church on the decline; she was a church on the rise. Fervent service and devotion were typical of her members and not passivity or blasé attitudes. Perhaps it would have been easier to have effected a change in attitudes had the church there been inactive or had they appeared not to have been experiencing God's blessings upon their work. However, the membership at Thyatira was busily engaged in doing good. If good works could save, perhaps the message to Thyatira would have been all positive!

Unique Negative Comment about Thyatira

"...You allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (v20). Jezebel was an Old Testament character with no apparent redeeming virtue. Everything that we

know about Jezebel was evil, or as we might say, she was rotten to the core. We know nothing of the Jezebel of whom Jesus speaks in this passage. It is probable that this was not her real name, but the characteristics of the woman at Thyatira were similar to the former Jezebel. Some believe, and it certainly fits the case, that the Jezebel of whom Jesus spoke was a female believer of the day who taught converts to embrace the culture with its sexual immorality and unfettered appetites. Regardless of the case, it is certain that Satan was happy to have her on his side and happy when some from Thyatira gave comfort to her.

Unique Charges Given to Thyatira

“Now to you say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come” (vv24-25). It is not easy to remain steadfast when the majority about you marches in another direction. Yet, this was the case with the faithful in Thyatira. They were swimming upstream, against the tide. The message of the Lord to the faithful few was “hold fast what you have till I come.” Discouragement of family and friends can be devastating to a person’s spiritual health; to those so affected, Jesus says, “Don’t give up!” Error when taught by friends and fellow-workers can demolish one’s drive to persevere; to all who find themselves in such circumstances, Jesus says, “Don’t give up!” When the tide of public opinion turns decidedly against us, it is easier to compromise and go with the flow; to those who find the doctrinal current so swift, Jesus says, “Don’t give up!”

Common Comments and Charges Made to Thyatira and to All

“I know your works...” (v. 19a). This phrase is found in each of the seven letters to the churches of Asia. It is at the same time a source of comfort and a source of fear. For those who strive to do the Lord’s will, to know that He knows is sometimes all that we need. For those who have little or no concern for the Lord’s will, to know that He knows is a sobering and fearsome thought. A message which must be heard loud and clear is, “I know your works.” Faithful children of God rejoice in this assurance.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (v22). The variation of this phrase, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” appears some nine times in the Gospel accounts making it one of Jesus’ favorite sayings. Counting the variant, “If anyone has an ear, let him hear,” in Revelation 13:9, this phrase appears seventeen times in scripture. God wants us to know that He speaks and that He speaks things of utmost importance. Furthermore, we are to know that His oracle is declared for heeding and not just hearing. The ear to which God appeals is the ear of the heart, the ear from which and in which submission occurs, God wants our undivided attention. In this case, listening with one ear simply is not enough; God demands our undivided attention!

Concluding Promise

“He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end..., I will give him the morning star” (v26a, 28). There is a lot more in this text, but the reader is asked to focus on this phrase. Literally having a star is greater than having one named for you. This greater gift is what the Lord offers. However, the star that is offered is not just any star; it is Christ Himself. “I, Jesus, ...am ...the Bright and Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16). To those who persevere, the Lord offers the greatest personal incentive; He offers Himself for eternity! Somehow, it must be admitted that no earthly enticement not all earthly enticements, come near this the grandest of offers. The wonderful thing about this offer is that it is for all men and for all time. It is to all who overcome and keep His works!

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