

The Wages of Faith Versus Tolerance

After spending the last two weeks examining Christ's letter to the Ephesian Church, we are going to do a little double-duty and cover two letters this week. The first one we will look at is the Letter to the Church in Smyrna. It is the shortest of the letters to the Seven Churches and is unique in that it contains no reprimands or criticisms. The second letter we will look at in our homework this week is the Letter to the Church in Pergamum. Persecution was not unknown to Pergamum, but as we will see in the second section of our homework, Pergamum had some serious offenses of which to repent.

I look forward to our discussion next week. It thrills me and enlightens me to hear what you have discovered in your studies. God's Word is so personal and He takes pains to reveal different things to each of us. Your studies are a blessing to me. Keep in His Word and through it He blesses those all around you!

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna

There must have been such a special place in Christ's heart for this beleaguered church. As we discovered in our lesson last week, Smyrna was a grand and thoroughly Roman city. It was beautiful and awe inspiring, designed to be the epitome of Hellenistic culture and architecture prized by the Romans, the premier cultural center of Asia Minor. Along with Roman presence came sanctified Roman persecution. The Smyranean Christians faced physical, emotional, and economic hardship not only from the Romans but from the Jewish population in Smyrna as well. The Jews received a dispensation from Rome freeing them from their obligation to worship the Emperor. The Christians did not receive that privilege and it left them open to hostilities on both sides.

Christ himself knew and experienced the physical and emotional torture of being persecuted by both the Romans and the Jews. It must have torn at his heart to see this faithful community of believers under Rome's foot on one side, and then be harassed and bullied by the Jews on the other. Despite the circumstances in which these Christians found themselves, they had an enduring faith. This letter to the Smyrneans, while short in length is long in encouragement.



Read Revelation 2:8-11 and answer the following questions.

How does Christ identify himself in this letter to the Smyrneans, and what are these titles to convey to the Smyrneans?

What is it Christ knows about the Smyrneans?

The Amplified Bible descriptively records verse 9-10 as follows:

⁹I know your affliction and distress and pressing trouble, and your poverty; but you are rich! And how you are abused and reviled and slandered by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Fear nothing that you are about to suffer. –Dismiss your dread and your fears! Behold, the devil is indeed about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested and proved and critically appraised; and for ten days you will have affliction. Be loyally faithful unto death – [that is,] even if you must die for it – and I will give you the crown of life.

How are they rich?

Who are “those who say they are Jews and are not”?

Why does Christ refer to them as a synagogue of Satan? (See also John 8:44)

Who does Christ say will put some of them in prison?

If it is persecution from the Romans and the Jews that the Christians are facing, why does Jesus say it is the devil that will put some from that church in prison?

What does Ephesians 6:12-13 say about what our earthly battle is against?

What does Paul tell us in Romans 8:38 about our help in these times of battle?

What does James 4:7-10 instruct?

What words of encouragement are to be found in Luke 12:4?

What do you think it means to “stand your ground” and “stand firm”?

Jesus tells the Smyranean church to stay faithful until what point?

What words of encouragement does Jesus offer in this letter to help them stand firm even to the point of death?

To what do you think the 10 days of suffering refers?

Smyrna was famous for its athletic games. The champion of the games, the one who withstood the rigors of tests and trials of athleticism was crowned with a wreath. The victor's crown was prestigious and hard earned. How does this image of a victor's crown illustrate Christ's promise of the Crown of Life? What is the crown of life? (See also James 1:12)

Finally in verse 11 what does Christ promise to those who overcome the tribulations and trials of persecution?

What is the second death? (See Rev. 21:6-8 and Luke 12:4)

From Paul's writing we learn that our battle as Christians is not with the oppressive powers of this world. Those powers are only agents of Satan used to harass, oppress, persecute, and kill God's faithful children in this world. Their tactics are to wear down and strike fear into the hearts of the faithful in order to paralyze them and even turn them against God, all in an effort to gain more power in the world and take as many souls from the Creator of the Universe as they can. We are to stand firm in the truth that once we profess our faith in Christ's saving work on the cross we are united with our Heavenly Father and cannot be separated from Him. We are subjects of his Heavenly Kingdom and with that we receive everlasting life. What Satan uses to persecute Christians, God uses to refine their faith.

The rub is standing firm is insanely hard! Satan will use every sling and arrow in his arsenal against us in an effort to either turn us away from God or make us so ineffective in the Kingdom of God that we are rendered useless. Christ praises the Smyrneans for their steadfast faith and obedience in the face of intense persecution, and warns them that it will get harder before it comes to an end. God knows the exact length of time they will have to endure persecution, and he knows to what extent that persecution will require of each individual. He tells them to *"be faithful, even to the point of death"*. And death will be required of some among their numbers. Christ in the beginning of his letter reminds the church that he *"is the first and the last, who died and came to life again."* He is God, from everlasting to everlasting. Jesus proclaims himself the God of Israel in words echoing Isaiah 44:6: *"This is what the LORD says--Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:*

I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. He is the eternal God, Israel's King and redeemer, and there is no other but him who can grant salvation and eternal life. Death did not have victory over him, and neither will it be victorious over the faithful. For their steadfast obedient faith in him and his promise, he will crown them as victors over the trials and tribulations that beset them in this life. They will be crowned with the crown of eternal life.



The intense persecutions faced by the Church in Smyrna is unheard of in our modern churches here in America. But Christians in India, Afghanistan, China and many other places in the world do face this on a daily basis. What can this letter teach the modern church in America and the world? What kind of persecution do Christians face today and what kind of persecution would tempt you to deny your faith?

The Letter to the Church in Pergamum

The church in Pergamum was also facing the severe persecution from the Romans and Jews as did the church in Smyrna. Many tenaciously held on to what had been established by the Apostles, but some were willing to forsake truth in the face of persecution and false teaching. Take a few minutes to pray that God will open his word to your heart today as we seek the truth forgotten by those in Pergamum.



Read Revelation 2:12-17

Our lesson today begins with Christ identifying himself as the one “*who has the sharp, double-edged sword*” (V. 12). This sword likely refers to the Roman *rhomphaia* used by soldiers in battle.

To what do you think this sword refers? See Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews 4:12-13.

For what does Christ commend this church (in verse 13) and what are the circumstances making this a difficult achievement?

To what point were the faithful in Pergamum willing to stand up for what they believed?

Antipas was an example of a “faithful witness”. What does that mean in the context of the scriptures?

As Pergamum was the seat of Roman authority in Asia Minor, it is not unlikely that the death of Antipas was sanctioned by Rome, possibly because he failed to worship the Roman Emperor and was possibly an outspoken leader in the Pergamum church preaching the Gospel. The penalty for failing to worship the emperor was death. The mention of Christ’s double-edged sword and its similarity to the Roman *rhomphaia* may have been meant to be a reminder that Christ’s sword is mightier than all the swords of Rome. This idea would be a comfort to all who were suffering under Roman persecution, knowing that one day Christ would avenge them.

The Pergamum Christians could have compromised their beliefs and accommodated the demands of the Romans and even the Jews. But many in this church refused to do so, even to the point of death. They were convicted in their faith to the point that they would not compromise. Unfortunately there were some in that church who chose to compromise.

What are the ramifications of compromising one’s beliefs?

What charge does Christ bring against some in the Pergamum church?



Read 2 Peter, Chapter 2. Peter has strong words for those who would entice others into compromising their faith. His words are sharply focused on false teachers. How do Peter's words reveal the evil that some in Pergamum were permitting to infiltrate their church? To what is compromise opening the church?

The Apostle Peter gives a brief summary over the actions of Balaam in 2 Peter 2:15. What does it say?

Returning to Revelation 2: 12-17, what does it mean that some in the church at Pergamum were holding to the teaching of Balaam (Thinking back to our class discussion about Balaam, see Numbers 25:1-9)

What does it mean that others held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans? (We discussed the Nicolaitans in the homework for Lesson 2, on page 5.)

What behavior in the Church was allowing this grow, and to what end?

Christ again makes a promise to those who choose to listen to and heed the warning to the church in Pergamum. What is it that they will receive if they obey him?

What do the following verses tell you about the hidden manna?

- Exodus 16:13-18
- John 6:51
- 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

In the beginning verses of our Revelation passage today we see an image of Christ as Judge, holding the double-edged sword, judging the *“thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”* (Hebrews 4:12-13) Christ sees the persecution of his faithful witnesses, he sees the injustice done by the wicked, and he sees the tolerance within the church at Pergamum allowing evil to invade the hearts of his followers. He knows who is willing to take a stance of tolerance for the sake of peace within the church rather than standing for righteousness according to the Word of God. He sees all of it. He knows whose hearts are truly fastened upon him, and whose hearts are divided, seemingly obedient yet also compromising. He sees so keenly that he can judge the motives of the heart those who are truly innocent and those who embrace wickedness.

Christ promises those who refuse to have anything to do with the worship of idols and the participation in the pagan worship feasts will be welcomed to dine with him in his kingdom. He is the Bread of Life sent by the Father. He is the provider and sustainer of the spiritual life of the believer. Receiving the hidden manna is incompatible with having dined at the worship table of demons. One offers life and the other death. Choosing to abstain from idol worship is choosing Life. 1 Corinthians 10:20-21 makes it very clear that compromise with the worship of idols is not to be tolerated in the life of a Christian. *“No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons.”*

The meaning of the white stone in verse Revelation 2:17 is unclear. There are a few interesting possibilities. One possibility is that the stone is in reference to the Roman judicial custom of a judge handing an accused criminal either a white stone or a black stone symbolic of a judgment of innocence or guilt, respectively. In this scenario, Christ, as Judge, hands a white stone to those who have either abstained or repented from tolerating or participating in idol worship. Another possible interpretation of the white stone is that it is a token that was given to contestants in the Greek games who completed their race. The stone would later be traded in for the actual reward. A third possibility is associated with the Roman custom of a white stone engraved with the bearer’s name serving as a ticket or pass allowing the holder entrance into feasts and functions in the temples of idols. This could translate into the faithful receiving a pass permitting entrance into the messianic feast in the heavenly kingdom.¹ Whatever the true meaning behind the white stone engraved with a new name is, it surely is to be prized.

¹ Gregg, Steve; Revelation: Four Views, A Parallel Commentary; 1997.



These passages bring up some interesting questions for us to discuss. Take a few minutes to write down a thoughtful response in preparation for our discussion.

From our passages in Revelation and Numbers 22 and 1 Corinthians 10, what is Christ's attitude towards compromising his word and tolerating sin with those who would subvert truth?

What attitude ought today's church take upon the pressure, the enticement and the call to compromise for the sake of tolerance?