

THE CHURCH PERSERVERING OR COMPROMISING!

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d. Letter to the Church at Smyrna (means “myrrh”) -- 2:8-11

[THE CHURCH THAT PERSEVERES UNTO DEATH]

i. Background on the City of Smyrna

Smyrna was also a harbour city like Ephesus. History has it that the first settlers who founded the city were from Greece. Battles were fought amongst the different Grecian tribes till the more powerful Ionian finally took control of the city. Minor skirmishes arose between cities in that region, such as those between Smyrna and Sardis and Smyrna and Lydia. A big battle was fought sometime around 600 B.C. between Smyrna and Sardis that left the city of Smyrna badly devastated for three centuries. Soon traces of villages arose out of the ashes of defeat but the port in Smyrna still laid dead. In 290 B.C. Smyrna was re-founded and was said to have risen from the dead. Rev. 2:8 was cited by God as an appropriate encouragement to the church at Smyrna.

Soon Smyrna rose to prominence even into the time of the Roman Empire. In 26 A.D. they sought permission from their new master, the Romans, to build a Temple to Tiberius. Tacitus tells the story, “The Smyrneans, “ he wrote, “having appealed to their ancient records to show whether Tantalus, the son of Jupiter, or Theseus, the son also of a god, or one of the Amazons was their founder, proceeded to the considerations in which they chiefly trusted, namely, their friendly services to the Roman people. They had aided Rome with a naval force, they said, not only in their wars abroad, but also in those they had fought in Italy. It was they, they said, who had first reared a temple in honour of Rome, when the power of the Roman people, though great, had not reached their highest glory, for the city of Carthage still stood, and powerful kings governed Asia. Sulla, too, they said, had experienced their generosity, when his army was in imminent peril from bitter weather and scarcity of clothes. When the matter was made known in the citizens’ assembly as Smyrna, all present stripped off their garments and sent them to the legions [“Smyrna, “ by E. M. Blaiklock, **The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible**, vol. 5, p. 462).”

Due to the above request, **Smyrna became the site for the second Asian Temple to the deity of Rome and the emperor and the seat of the Caesar-cult which was to cause so much suffering in the church. Smyrna had worshipped the spirit of Rome since 195 B.C. The Temple of Tiberius** increased and strengthened the pride of Smyrna.

Apollonius of Tyana (ca. A.D. 96?) wrote, "For though your city is the most beautiful of all cities under the sun, and makes the sea its own, and holds the fountains of Zephyrus, yet it is a greater charm to wear a crown of men than a crown of proticos, for buildings are seen only in their one place, but men are seen everywhere, and spoken about everywhere, and make their city as vast as the range of countries which they visit (**Zondervan**, p. 464)."

ii. Background on the Church at Smyrna

"The story of the actual coming of Christianity to Smyrna is not known. It was probably a result of Paul's activity in Ephesus, followed up and extended by John. On the evidence of the apocalyptic letter, Smyrna's Christians stood well in the 1st Century. They continued to stand, and Smyrna was one of the Asian cities which withstood the Turk, and was among the last to fall to Islam. Such resistance played a part in history. The delaying action of surviving remnants of the Empire in the East, allowed Europe time to emerge from the Middle Ages, and receive with creative hands those gifts which brought the Renaissance and the modern world to birth (**Zondervan**, p. 464)."

Polycarp the martyr bishop of Smyrna, died in A.D. 155. He was one of the last pupils of John the Apostle.

iii. The Church of Smyrna in Revelation

1. Character of Jesus Christ – 2:8

Revelation 2:8, "*And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;*"

This is a most comforting phrase to believers who are under going persecution. The Christians in Smyrna were

experiencing severe persecution at the time of writing.

Christ is known as the first and the last. In terms of time he is the Master of time. He controls time. In terms of events Christ is sovereign. Nothing happens without His permission. He is present at the beginning every event and He is in control of every event.

Christ is introduced as the One who was dead and is alive. Death may appear as the master but death is the servant to Christ. Death cannot defeat Christ. He was dead and now he is alive. He is the resurrection and the life. Do not need to fear death as Christians. Remain faithful to Christ who Himself died and is now alive. So too will every believer who died in Christ Jesus.

God wanted them to know at least the following three truths:

1. Do not fear death. Do not fear Satan who has the power of death. Matthew 10:28, "*And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*"

2. The resurrection is certain because Christ's resurrection was sure and certain. John 11:25-26, "*Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?*"

3. God's Sovereign Control over all things includes the believers' life and death. Persevere and do not murmur or complain or compromise when you are going through adversities in life. James 1:2-4, "*My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*"

2. Commendations on the Church – 2:9

Revelation 2:9, "*I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*"

1. I know (“oida” – refers to complete and full knowledge rather than “ginosko” which refers to a progressive acquisition of knowledge) . .

- **‘thy works’** – a general term which summarizes all that follows,

3. **‘tribulations’** – Literally means “pressure,” and is the common NT word for persecution or tribulation. The Christians in Smyrna were facing intense persecution because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. The reasons for the hostility would include:

- The true worship of Christ will immediately necessitate **the rejection of the cult worship** of the Roman emperor which Smyrna was well known for, for centuries. They would be branded as rebels and the refusal to bow to Caesar could be treason.

- **The refusal to worship the pantheon of gods** would also give rise to anger and hatred by the citizens of Smyrna. Their worship of an “invisible” God could also give rise to the misunderstanding that these Christians were “atheists” as they do not worship any god that could be “seen.” They will then be seen as anti-social and elitist in their society.

- The unbelieving Jews would **charge them for blasphemous acts** such as “eating” flesh and drinking “blood” when they partake of the Lord’s Supper. John 6:51-57, *“I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.”*

- The Christian could also **be charged with being “home wreckers”** by their insistence on following Christ even if it means to choose between divorce or Christ (Luke 12:51-53).” These Jews were castigated very strongly by Christ when He called them “synagogues of Satan.”

- Suffering for Christ is part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian. It is part of the calling. Philippians 1:29, *“For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.”*

9. **“poverty”** – *“ptocheia”* refers to beggars who could not live by their own labours but entirely dependent upon the alms of others [Richard Trench, **Synonyms of the New Testament**, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 128-29]. It was an extremely poor church as far as monetary giving and wealth were concern.

10. **“The blasphemy of the Jews”**—a very strong term usually reserved for hostile words against God. This means that in the midst of the Gentile persecutions, the persecution from the Jews far exceeded that of the Gentiles. They were probably maligned. Words were put into the mouths of Christians. They were severely slandered without any opportunity for defense or recourse.

Should the obedient Christian be surprised?

Matthew 5:10-11, *“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.”*

3. Encouragement to Persevere On – 2:10

Revelation 2:10, *“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison,*

that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

1. **'Fear'** is a powerful and effective tool used by Satan and his followers to dominate and intimidate. Many Christians have succumbed to this throughout the history of the church. The encouragement from Christ was to look at suffering in the eye and not be afraid of it. **John 16:33**, "*These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*"

Psalms 56:11, "*In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me.*"

Joshua was commanded to be strong and very courageous when he led Israel in Joshua 1:1-8.

Why are we afraid? What is there to be afraid of in this life?

Be warned if you are afraid of man or Satan. This is God's warning to the fearful in Revelation 21:8, "**But the fearful**, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, **shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.**" [emphasis added]

2. **'The Devil will cast some into prison'** – Behind all their "earthly" struggles the Christians must see the evil hand of Satan. The enemy might appear in flesh and blood but behind the persecution of the believers is the Devil Himself. **Ephesians 6:10-13**, "*Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.*"

The purpose was that the Christians may be tested in order that their faith might be strengthened. **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**, "*And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.*"

James 1:2-4, "*My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*"

The imprisonment will last only ten days. The persecution will be intense but brief. When we know the time then it will be much more bearable.

The time frame is mentioned here to let the Christians know that their Heavenly Father is very much aware of what is happening to His beloved children. The length of time of their stay in prison is in God's Holy and Sovereign hand, not one day longer!

3. **“Be faithful unto Death”** – Is there any other kind of faithfulness that is taught in the Bible other than unto Death? The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is crucial in the face of persecutions. **It is the evidence that he is a child of God.**

Acts 20:24, "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."

Acts 21:12-13, "And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

What price have you placed on your own life? Is it worth the defense of God's Holy Word and the Testimony of Jesus Christ?

4. **“Crown of life”**--Most appropriate are these words when the Christians were encouraged to persevere unto death. What awaits them if they were to die for Jesus' sake was the Crown of Life. It must include eternal life in the presence of God Almighty. The word for crown is “*stephanos*” which refers to a victor's crown. He is given this crown as a reward for his persevering faith to the very end of his life on this earth!!

James 1:12, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."

Do not deny the LORD especially in the face of persecution. The warning from Christ is very clear in Matthew 10:33, **“But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.”**

4. The Reader's Response – 2:11

Revelation 2:11, "*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*"

- i. **“The second death”**— This is a clear reference to eternal death which the Christians were warned to avoid and be made aware of.

Revelation 20:6, "*Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.*"

Revelation 20:14, "*And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*"

Revelation 21:8, "*But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.*"

How many types of deaths are there in the Bible?

- ii. **“will not be hurt of the second death”** – This is the most emphatic negative found in the entire Greek language, a double negative. In other words God's assurance is an undeniable guarantee that the ones who will persevere, i.e. be faithful unto death, **will definitely not be “hurt”** or “damaged” by the second death. No matter how potent the second death is, it will not have the slightest power over the Christians who persevere to the very end.

iv. Letter to the Church at Pergamos – 2:12-17

[THE CHURCH THAT HAS COMPROMISED]

- e. **Background on the City of Pergamos**

Pergamos was about 100 miles north of Ephesus. Smyrna was about half way between them. Unlike Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamos was not a port city. It was also not built along any of the major trade routes. Despite this, Pergamos was regarded as one of the greatest cities of Asia. Pliny, the Roman writer, called Pergamos, "by far the most distinguished city in Asia." [cited by Robert H. Mounce, **The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on the New Testament** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 95.]

By the time John wrote Revelation, Pergamos had already been Asia's capital city for almost 250 years (since 133 B. C. when its last king bequeathed his kingdom to Rome). This city is survived today as the Turkish city of Bergama (MacArthur, vol. 1, p. 84).

Pergamos was an impressive city in her days of glory. She was built on a conical hill towering some one thousand feet above the plain. It had the perspective of a royal city with her grandiose vantage points over her surrounding region. It literally dominates and gives her inhabitants a sense of security and dignity. The city also had a huge library (200,000 handwritten volumes second only to that of the one in the major city of Alexandria, Egypt). So well known was the city's library that legend has it that the Pergamums were the ones who invented vellum (leather parchments) for the writing of books.

With her "looks", Pergamos was also a city of culture and learning. The physician Galen, second only in prominence to Hippocrates was born and studied in Pergamos. The city regarded herself as the defender of Greek culture in Asia Minor. Pergamos was an important centre of worship for four of the main deities of the Greco-Roman world. There were temples dedicated to Athena, Asklepios, Dionysos, and Zeus. Overshadowing all these idols was the worship of the emperor.

Pergamos built her first temple dedicated to emperor worship in 29 B.C. in honour of Caesar Augustus. Subsequently the city would build two more temples, one for the worship of Emperor Trajan and the other for Septimus Severus. As emperor worship required all the city inhabitants to offer sacrifices to the Caesar once a year, Pergamos became one of the most dangerous places for Christians to live in.

2. Background on the Church at Pergamos

Paul probably founded the church there during his Second Missionary Trip although some have surmised that it could also be one of his disciples who were converted in Ephesus and returned to Pergamos to found the church. The latter could be true as Pergamos was not mentioned at all in the book of Acts.

Other than what we read here in Revelation we do not have any other information on the church in Pergamos.

3. The Church of Pergamos in Revelation --

i. Character of Jesus Christ – 2:12

Revelation 2:12, "*And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;*"

‘a two-edged sword’ – refers to the Word of God itself. Hebrews 4:12, "*For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*"

The sharpness of the sword emphasizes the potency and power of the Word of God. Revelation 19:11-15, "*And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.*"

Since the church in Pergamos is a church with condemnations the emphasis is most likely on the potency of Christ's judgement that will follow. The precision and sharpness of Christ's judgement is the emphasis.

ii. Commendations on the Church – 2:13

Revelation 2:13, "*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.*"

‘Satan’s seat’ – The many Temples dedicated to idolatrous worship as well as emperor worship makes the city a place which is known as Satan's Headquarters.

The Christians in Pergamos held their own when it comes to succumbing to this power of Satan. They “**continue to hold fast**” (present tense) to the name of Jesus Christ and did not deny His name. They were loyal to Christ in separating themselves from such kind of worship. They did not deviate from the truths of God’s Word in terms of worshipping other gods or wrong gods. They were faithful to the truth of God taught in the Bible. No amount of Satanic opposition was able to move them. They remained steadfast, unmoveable always abounding in the work of the LORD.

Antipas was killed probably for not bowing to the worship of the emperor. They were courageous Christians as they were not moved by the fear of death. When one of their own was martyred they held onto their faith even preparing to die for Christ if need be. Philippians 1:29, "*For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake,*"

4. **Sins Committed in the Church at Pergamos – 2:14-15**

iii. Doctrine of Balaam – 2:14

Revelation 2:14, "*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 stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.*"

But not all of them were faithful and courageous. There were in the midst of the church of Pergamos some who held fast (same word as used in verse 13) to the doctrine of Balaam. They were holding fast to God’s Word and testimony of Christ BUT at the same time they held on fast to the doctrine of Balaam. This syncretistic form of devotion and worship is come today too! It is like a kind of schizophrenic behaviour, holding on to the notion that if I please God in some areas I can indulge in sin in others. God would not mind is what we deceive ourselves into rationalizing. We give with the right hand and sin with our left!

The OT account of Balaam is found in Numbers 22-25.

The sin of Balaam costs the death of 24,000 Israelites (Num. 25:9), including many of the leaders of Israel (Num. 25:4-5).

Balaam was commissioned Balak, the king of Moab, to curse Israel who was on her way to the Promised Land. Moses was their leader at that time. On three separate occasions Balaam failed to curse Israel. Balak was incensed

with Balaam by his failure. He could not bring the judgement of God upon Israel no matter how he tried.

But what he did next was evil. He told Balak to send "loose" Moabite women into the camp of Israel and get them to sin. In the course of their sexual immorality, Israel was called by the daughters of Moab to sacrifice to their gods. The Israelites did. They ate food offered to idols and bowed themselves to these idols.

The sins committed then were that of idolatry and immorality (Num. 25). From sexual immorality to eating food offered to idols to the worship of idols.

2 Peter 2:15-16, "*Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet.*"

What some of the Pergamums did was that they married Christ with the worship of pagan gods. They thought that it was all right to do so. What made it worse was that these people were tolerated in the church.

iv. Doctrine of the Nicolaitanes – 2:15

Revelation 2:15, "*So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate.*"

See notes on Nicolaitanes in church at Ephesus. They also tolerated those who held to this doctrine.

The problem was one of religious compromise. They were strong others who were not one of their own. But when one of their own compromised they were lax and did not take the necessary steps to "clean" house.

Separation based upon respect of persons is a mockery in the sight of God. When Christians handle sin, sin must be handled the way that God would handle sin. Remember how God dealt Moses, David, Saul, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Balaam, Peter, etc. with each one of them when they sinned? God was no respecter of persons when it comes with judging sin.

Deuteronomy 1:17, "*Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great; ye shall*

not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's: . . ." This is one of the hallmarks of a godly leader. He is able to make objective judgements and deal with sin regardless of who the person is or what he may have done for the church.

5. The Reader's Response – 2:16-17

Revelation 2:16-17, "*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.*"

‘Repent’ – or Jesus will come quickly and will deal with them His way i.e. swiftly and judicially.

‘Manna’ – angel food. Hidden manna, where is it? I believe it refers to the manna which was hid in the Ark of the Covenant (Exo. 16:33). This is a type of Christ. Jesus is the living bread (cf. John 6:48-51, "I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

‘White stone’ – In Roman times, white stone was awarded to the victor in athletic contests. The name of the victor was inscribed on it and this will serve as a "ticket" to enter special functions and award banquets. With this in view, Christ's promised the believers who overcome that He will have eternal entry into heaven itself and attends the victory celebration, i.e the Supper of the Lamb. What the new name is remains to be seen in the future. It is new in terms of quality rather than time i.e. in contrast to the old.