

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 99-28

Dear Reader

Were you challenged by God's letter to Ephesus? God intends us all to be challenged by each of these letters. Today, many assemblies are small and facing great opposition as they seek to maintain the truth in a hostile world and even a hostile Christian community which generally is happy with its own ways. If you are expressing fellowship in such a local assembly, then take heart in the letter to Smyrna, but don't fall prey to what happened with Pergamos.

THE LORD'S LETTER TO THE ASSEMBLY AT SMYRNA: Please read Revelation 2:8-11

The second local assembly addressed by the Lord was located in the city of Smyrna, meaning *myrrh* which has the thought of *suffering*. Myrrh was an ingredient in perfume obtained by squashing a shrub, and pictures the sweetness of Christ that was shown by this assembly when it was persecuted for its stand for Christ and His Church at the time of the ten pagan Roman rulers (Nero to Diocletian), when there were many martyrs. There is no disapproval of this assembly. Today, many local churches are suffering under Communist and Muslim persecution. Others are standing against the tide of compromise and ecumenicalism, and thus are really struggling. This may give you some idea of what to look for as we apply the Lord's words to Smyrna to our own local assembly situations.

2 Timothy 3:12 says that "all who *desire* to live godly in Christ Jesus *will suffer persecution*." Something is wrong if we *aren't* suffering some measure of persecution; only let it be from *without*, not from within (1 Pet.4:12-16)!

The Lord spoke of Himself as "the First and the Last who was dead and came to life" (v.8). Persecuted people need to know the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb.13:8). He was there before the persecutions began and will carry His own through them to greater blessings. Even if the persecutions mean death, to depart and be with Christ is *far better* (Phil.1:21-23). No person ever suffered like our Lord did (1 Pet.2:24). The death of the cross (Phil.2:8) was no ordinary death, even naturally speaking. But death could not hold our Lord. He arose victorious. If any were killed in the persecutions, then as Christ was resurrected, so would they be also.

The Lord knew of Smyrna's tribulation and poverty! He suffered tribulation and knew poverty. In Matthew 8:20, He said, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Yet, none of these things hindered this perfect Man from fulfilling His mission. Likewise, the Christians at Smyrna could have sought to *accommodate* the surrounding religious world. But they didn't! They maintained the truth, and the Lord meant everything to them.

Today, many Christians have left local assembly positions they knew were right, using many excuses. Local churches have compromised or practically given up the truth to gain more outward recognition and/or more people. As a result, fables or myths are preached in many places instead of the whole truth (2 Tim.4:2-4). What about us?

But You Are Rich; The Synagogue of Satan (v.9)

Smyrna thought it was poor, but the Lord said it was rich — rich in Christ, rich in faith (Jas.2:5). Paul said, "I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, that *I may gain Christ*" (Phil.3:8, 14). The gold, silver and precious stones of 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 speak of millennial blessings that will last. Luke 19:11-27 implies great blessings in the future for faithfulness today. Do we really believe this? If so, are we willing to accept persecution for the Lord?

Some had gone back into Judaism in thought and practice, and were trying to bring the assembly at Smyrna back to that position (v.9). God called it *blasphemy*! Judaism had been God's religion, but Judaism was a system of law-keeping which was a *tutor* to help keep the Jews in line until Christ came (Gal.3:19-26). Its rituals pictured the Person and work of Christ (Lk.24:27). Its ordained priesthood had authority over the people who were at a distance

from God. All hopes were earthly. Everything was conditional: *if* you do this, such and such will be yours. So, there was no certainty. Once Jesus was glorified and the Holy Spirit come down, everything changed for the better! Judaism ended and Christianity began.

The *synagogue* was the Jew's religious gathering center. The word means "a gathering together," giving the thought of an earthly organization gathered for religious purposes. Today, we believers have been called *out* of the masses of this world to have a *heavenly* character and a *heavenly* future (Heb.10:19-22, etc.). We don't need law-keeping or a priestly class. To try to turn the Assembly of the Living God into a synagogue with its earthly hopes was *Satan's* work; a master-plan of treachery to attempt to take away the Christian's unique privileges and position, and his joy *in* and closeness *to* Christ. Yet that is exactly what much of professed Christianity has become! What about your local church? Is there human ritual? Are the people only a laity with a clergy (official or not) ruling? Is it *judaized*?

Do Not Fear What You Are About to Suffer (v.10)

God knows that for some, things are going to get worse. In some countries Christians are commonly cast into prison. Even in the West, Christian belief is increasingly under attack. The increasing evil, the breakdown of restraint, is "the mystery of lawlessness" (1 Thes.2). It is to be expected as we approach the Rapture. God here tells us who is behind all this. It is the *devil*, the false accuser, whose *accusations* in the ears of the government officials entices them to act against Christians. But God is in control. We are to trust and obey regardless of the possibility of persecution.

That You May be Tested; I Will Give You the Crown of Life (v.10)

Peter was tested and had to learn that in himself, in his flesh, nothing good dwells (Rom.7:18). He had to learn not to have confidence in the flesh (Phil.3:3), that is, in his old nature, regardless of his IQ, education or position. See 1 Peter 4:12. God allows a carefully measured amount of Satan's hatred to affect Christians to determine how faithful they are to Him, and that they might become effective, battle-hardened soldiers for Him. So God puts us all (both as individuals and as local assemblies) to the test. Are we passing or failing the tests He presents us with?

Smyrna was tested *ten* days. Ten is the number of human responsibility, the measure of man's capacity for action. Hence the *ten* commandments (Dt.10:4), etc. The point is, the test is limited and is in God's hands. We therefore should not be discouraged. Satan will not win the war. But we need to "contend *earnestly* for the faith" (Jude 3), and that *will* bring persecution (2 Tim.3:12). But *there is to be no retirement in God's things*. When *He* retires us, it will be to a better service with Himself. In the meanwhile we are to be faithful and not quitters.

The devil throws believers into prison; the Lord gives a crown. The devil seeks to kill the believer; the Lord's crown is one of *life* and is given to those who love Him (Jas.1:12). We even now have *His* "eternal life" (Jn.5:24; 1 Jn.5:20)! Satan's most hateful work — death (Heb.2:14-15) — is undone by the Lord by resurrection, and the fear of death is undone even now (1 Cor.15:54-57). Soon, the Lord will transform our bodies of humiliation to be like His body of glory (Phil.3:21, JND). Isn't this *exactly* the promise needed when suffering persecution and feeling neglected and maybe ready to quit or to become less involved in the spiritual warfare?

He Who Overcomes Shall Not Be Hurt by the Second Death (v.11)

All Christians are overcomers because He has overcome (Jn.16:33). The overcomer has overcome death. Physical death to be with Christ is a *promotion*! Death is no longer a feared enemy (1 Cor.15:54-57; Heb.2:14-15). The fearful part of death is any *judgment* to follow. The greatest and most fearful and lasting judgment is the *abiding wrath of God* on the unsaved (Jn.3:36) in the Lake of Fire, eternal hell, the *second* death (Rev.20:6, 14-15), *eternal separation from God*, under His wrath, although physically alive. We overcomers have no fear of this second death.

THE LORD'S LETTER TO THE ASSEMBLY AT PERGAMOS: Please read Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamum or Pergamos was a city renowned for its splendor, sensuous idolatry and beautiful temples. *Pergamos*

means *marriage* and historically speaks of when the Church and the world were united when Christianity became the state religion under Constantine, beginning about 330 AD. The Church, outwardly, became *married* to the world, although engaged to Christ (2 Cor.11:2). Pergamos also means *elevated*: the Church was elevated to a place of earthly power and accepted its place in the kingdoms of this world instead of properly viewing itself as called out of this world to a heavenly hope and reigning with Christ in His millennial kingdom.

These Things Says He Who Has the Sharp Two-Edged Sword (v.12)

Unlike Smyrna, the assembly at Pergamos was not as faithfully going on with the Lord, so the Lord addressed and rebuked that unfaithfulness. Their public place as a witness and a testimony for the Lord was in jeopardy. The two-edged sword (Rev.1:16) is the Word of God (Eph.6:17) which cuts so as to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb.4:12). Nothing is hidden from God: He sees through every facade. So the Lord was not fooled or distracted by Pergamos' generally proper outward form. He knew their worldly mind-set, that they considered it to be *good* to join hands with the world. He knows *exactly* what is going on in the assemblies where we express fellowship!

I Know Where You *Dwell*, Where Satan's Throne Is (v.13)

The Pergamos assembly was in a worldly city, but that is not the point here. We all are *in* the world. Rather, in the Bible the term *dwell* has a moral connotation: they were *mentally* dwelling in a wrong condition. They had become *conformed* to this world (Rom.12:2). They were content to settle down in a worldly alliance instead of being pilgrims and strangers passing through the world, on the way to their heavenly home (1 Pet.2:11; Heb.11:13; Phil.3:20).

Lucifer (the great angel who became Satan) was once given charge over the earth (Ezek.28:14), but he disobeyed God and fell from being God's great servant to being God's great enemy (Isa.14:12-14). When God created Adam and Eve, He gave *them* authority over this world (Gen.1:26, 28) to the great displeasure of Satan. In the Garden of Eden, Satan by trickery defeated man. As a result, to this day, Satan reigns as the "god of this age" (2 Cor.4:4). The assembly at Pergamos, having become worldly-minded, was playing in the enemy's camp. Separation to Christ alone was no longer maintained. We are not to love the world or the things in the world (1 Jn.2:15-17). How we need to keep *God's* perspective as our mind-set! Do you think the Lord approves of all our expensive "toys" which take so much time and energy and money away from Him and His work? How about our involvement in worldly politics?

We may not want to seem peculiar to the surrounding world in our local church-life, so we may not preach or speak out quite so strongly on some things. Strange customs to the world and even to many Christians such as head coverings for the sisters (1 Cor.11:3-16) are easy to ignore. Why buck the trend of the women's movement, etc.?

And You Hold Fast to My Name ... And Did Not Deny My Faith (v.13)

Even though Pergamos compromised with the world, they held tenaciously to Christ's name, to who He is. Today, it is commonly taught that Christ could sin, that He had to struggle to obey God, etc. We looked at some of these false teachings in Newsletter 97-10. Could the Lord say of us, and the assemblies where we express fellowship, that we correctly and securely hold everything connected with the Person of the Christ, and reject that which is false?

One way the word *faith* is used in the Bible is to define the whole Christian doctrine (Lk.18:8; Acts 14:22; Eph.4:5; 2 Tim.4:7; Tit.1:13; Jude 3). This is how the word is used here. The Lord has set forth in His Word an entire doctrinal pattern, centered on Himself — the tenets of Christianity. Pergamos held firm to what the Lord taught as to Christianity. How seriously do *we* take what God's Word says? Are we unwilling to accept portions that interfere with our preconceived notions or with what we want to do? If so, we really don't believe God.

Antipas Was My Faithful Martyr, Who Was Killed Among You, Where Satan Dwells (v.13)

Antipas means *against all*. He stood against the amalgamation of Pergamos with the surrounding world which is the dwelling place, morally speaking, of Satan, the adversary. Antipas wouldn't compromise. And He was right, for God

highly approves of him, calling him “My faithful martyr.” He wanted *God’s* way. But he was a thorn in the side of this amalgamation, so presumably the “world” and Satan simply got rid of him!

But I Have ... Against You, Because You Have There Those Who Hold the Doctrine of Balaam (v.14)

What Christian today can say that he or she has not in some degree settled down morally in the world? It is one of the sins today of Christians everywhere. But why did the Lord wait till Pergamos to speak strongly? The reason is that wrong *doctrine* is worse than careless practice caused by weakness, where the doctrine is right. Wrong doctrine hits at the core of Christianity. However, doctrine and practice are closely connected.

Balaam (Num.22-25; 31) was, as his name indicates, “a swallower or confounder of the people.” His *doctrine* is defined here by the Lord so we will understand what was meant by Pergamos holding his doctrine. Balaam counseled Balak to entice Israel to eat food sacrificed to idols. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn.5:21). He also counseled the women of Midian to sexually entice the men of Israel (Num.25; 31:16). His counsel was heeded and those women were very successful. Yet God has said that, although the marriage (sexual) bed is undefiled, He will judge the sexually immoral (Heb.13:4). There were those in the Pergamos assembly who were advocating such worldly compromises. Let down the walls of separation: the world isn’t so bad after all, they apparently argued.

Thus You Also Have Those Who Hold the Doctrine of the Nicolaitans (v.15)

We covered the spiritual meaning of the *Nicolaitans* in Newsletter 97-8 and reviewed it last month. In Ephesus, the Nicolaitan sin was an outbreak of only a few and was opposed by that local church. In Pergamos, it was an *accepted doctrine or teaching* by at least a faction in that church. Historically, it was about 400-500 AD that the combination of the average Christian failing to fulfill his responsibilities as part of God’s Church and energetic men who took for themselves the position that God gave to all, brought on the clergy-laity system. This system still reigns virtually everywhere, unchallenged by any significant voice. But in God’s things, the majority are often wrong. God’s condemnation of Pergamos is in part because they were supporting this clergy-laity doctrine. How about our local church? Is there a clergy who is the minister and/or the one who seeks (and perhaps is *hired*) to rule over the other brothers and sisters? Remember, one doesn’t have to be an *official* clergyman to do the deeds of the Nicolaitans!

Repent or Else I Will Come To You Quickly (v.16)

God will maintain the holiness of His house (1 Pet.4:17), the Church of the living God (1 Tim.3:15). He prefers the wrong to be stopped by ministry which brings repentance. Repentance is a change from the previously-sinful course, to what is right in God’s sight. But He *demand*s such obedience. The alternate is the “or else.” Some local assemblies have simply become another independent Christian group; others have died off. Others have had prayer meetings with humiliation, repentance and confession, and God has blessed. Where does your local church stand in this regard? Do we want to experience God’s governmental sword of judgment (Rev.19:15, 21)?

To Him Who Overcomes I Will Give Some of the Hidden Manna; I Will Give Him a White Stone and on the Stone a New Name Written Which No One Knows Except Him Who Receives It (v.17)

The promise to the overcomer is first some of the hidden manna. God sent Manna (meaning *what is it?*) to feed His people in the wilderness (Ex.16). After the Manna ceased, there was one pot of Manna hidden in the Ark in the Tabernacle (Ex.16:32-35; Heb.9:4). The Ark is a type (picture) of Christ. Manna also is a type of Christ, the bread of life, His flesh given in the death of the cross (Jn.6:41-51). For those close to the Lord, who have not forgotten Him, special enjoyments of Himself are promised which will satisfy their spiritual hunger.

The white stone was a well-known symbol of victory and acceptance at the time John wrote. *White* speaks of purity (Isa.1:18; Rev.19:11), and Christ is *the* living stone (1 Pet.2:4) to whom we, as living stones, belong (1 Pet.2:5). So the white stone is a picture of our perfect acceptance, our purity as being “in Christ” because we are “new creation” in Him (2 Cor.5:17). The white stone was individualized. There was a *new name* written on it. Not your old name

of John or Sally *in Adam*, but the new name of John or Sally *in Christ* as was promised even in the Old Testament (Isa.56:5; 62:2). As believers our names are written in the book of (eternal) life (Phil.4:3).

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