

Understanding Revelation – Topic 2

Desirable Fragrant Faithful

**The first three churches
of the Book of Revelation**

An exposition of Revelation Chapter 2: 1–17

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Ephesus

The church desirable to God

Revelation Chapter 2: 1–7

Ephesus

Background

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write ...

The first of the seven churches of Revelation was called Ephesus. This church was chosen because its name, and condition, was a fitting representation of the first period of the Christian church. *To the angel in the church* is the original reading. This is an allusion to the leader or elder of the congregation.

Meaning of Ephesus

The name *Ephesus* means *desirable*. This was an accurate description of the early church during most of the first one hundred odd years of its existence. The period of the Ephesus era extended to approximately 150 AD. The period corresponds to the white horse epoch of the first of the seven seals. (Note, however, the seven churches do not necessarily correspond with the other periods of the seven seals).

Significance of Christ's title

...who holds the seven stars...

Why is Jesus depicted in this way in relation to the early church? The fact of the matter is that the Christians of that earliest era faced a hostile pagan world while they were fulfilling Christ's gospel commission. They were the pioneers of the faith. To be aware that Christ in heaven held them, as it were, in His very own right hand -the hand of power and authority - was a tremendous comfort, and gave them a sense of serenity and security in a time of extreme duress. As Jesus had previously promised,

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow Me....they shall never perish [eternally] neither shall any man snatch them out of my hand... and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. John 10:27-29

This promise is also extended to every servant of God in every age. It also reminds them that everything they accomplish is due to the Christ who upholds and empowers them. Sacred history records that failure to realize this can all too easily cause any religious leader to become a "fallen star".

*...wandering stars, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever.
Jude 13*

...and walks in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands... v1

The term *walk* denotes a ministry towards, and a care and watchfulness toward, Christ's faithful servants. The Old Testament records that the priests of the tabernacle walked to and fro in the performance of their daily ministry; likewise Jesus Christ, as our great High Priest, walks to and fro in the spiritual temple *on earth* caring for His faithful servants.

...I know your works...

This is stated in regard to each of the seven churches of Revelation, denoting Christ's perfect and complete knowledge of His people.

*...all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account
Hebrews 4:13*

Jesus notices every example of loyalty as well as every instance of compromise. He also recognizes every act of love, even if no one on earth may be aware of it.

Christ's commendations

I know ... your labour, your patience...

The word *labour* involves *labour with weariness*. The early Christians did not make great professions of faith; rather, they were people of action. *The love of Christ* urged them on (2 Corinthians 5:14). This was graphically illustrated in the Book of Acts when they were motivated by the power of Pentecost: *they went everywhere preaching the word Acts 8:14*

In the Roman Empire alone over three and a half million people were won to the faith by 100 AD, that is, in 69 years. Edward Gibbon declared,

*There is the strongest reason to believe that before the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, the faith of Christ had been preached in every province and in all the great cities of the empire*¹

The word *patience* denotes *persevering endurance*. This is not merely passive fortitude but brave and persistent active endurance. The early Christians did not give up nor give in.

*The gospel...which was preached to every creature under heaven...
Colossians 1:23*

The feats of the early Christians comprise one of the greatest events of history. From one hundred and twenty people (Acts 1:15) to over 3,500,000 in sixty-nine years is testimony to the persevering labours of those early believers.

...and that you cannot bear those who are evil...

Christ commends the intolerance of the early Christians to wrongdoing. And still today He calls for intolerance of evil within the church. We are counseled to *bear one another's burdens* (Galatians 6:2) but we are to *abhor that which is evil* (Romans 12:9). This is in striking contrast to the usual attitude of most Christians. Under the guise of love it is easy to tolerate evil within the church, offering the excuse that such people need our help and sympathy. However Jesus gave clear instruction on this matter.

After efforts to bring such a person to repentance

... if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be unto you like a heathen and a tax collector. Matthew 18:17

This means that such a person must be separated from church membership and viewed as one who needs to be won again to Christ. The church of God should be publicly seen to be intolerant of evil.

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 12 vols. (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1789), 65.

I will set no wicked thing before my eyes: I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me Psalm 101:3

No man loves God truly who cannot hate evil.²

We must show all meekness to men but we must show a just zeal against their sins.³

This attitude is the sign of a spiritually healthy church. Tolerance of wrongdoing within the fellowship confirms evildoers in their sin. The rebuke of evil activity, however, can lead to repentance from sin. It is also a safeguard to the church, especially with respect to the weaker members.

...And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars. v2

The early Christians tested all who claimed to possess spiritual gifts, including those who came as apostles and teachers. Paul had specifically warned the Ephesian elders of these dangers. Consequently these Christians knew that they were engaged in a spiritual warfare with the great enemy of Christ and were alert to the attempts of false agents to influence the church. Therefore they investigated and examined everyone who claimed to be an apostle.

Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God...For I know this, that after my departure shall savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember... Acts 20:28-31

The early Christians did watch and remember.

Zeal for pure doctrine characterized the Ephesian church⁴

Who were these false apostles whom true believers found to be liars? They were a group of Jewish believers called *Judaisers*. The apostle Paul called them *false brethren*. In *Galatians 1:7; 2:4* He warned:

Beware of dogs [backbiters], beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation. Philipians 3:2

The mutilation refers to the Judaisers who demanded that Gentile believers submit to circumcision and keep the ceremonial law of Moses.

And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Acts 15:1

The Judaisers were a severe trial to the early church, but the leaders tested and subsequently rejected their false teaching. The elders' diligence serves as an example of the work of faithful leaders of the church in every age.

² Rev. Boyd Carpenter, "The Revelation of St. John", in *Ellicott's Bible Commentary* Edited by Charles J. Ellicott, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), See Revelation 2.

³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1706-1721), See Revelation 2.

⁴ Rev. Boyd Carpenter, See Revelation 2.

... you have persevered and have patience and have laboured for my name's sake and have not become weary. v3

The early Christians could not bear those who were evil, but they could bear persecution and sufferings for the sake of Christ. In their labours to extend the reach of the gospel they did not faint. Note the exploits of the first apostles:

The exploits of the apostles

James	Son of Zebedee. Executed by Herod Agrippa in 44 AD.
Philip	Preached the gospel in Upper Asia. At Heliopolis in Phrygia he was scourged, imprisoned and crucified in 54 AD.
Matthew	Laboured in Parthia and Ethiopia where he was martyred in the city of Nadabah 60 AD where he was killed with a halberd.
James the Less	A brother of Jesus and an overseer of the early Jerusalem church. He was stoned by his fellow Jews at 94 years of age and his brains were dashed out by a fuller's club.
Matthias	Replaced Judas Iscariot the traitor. Stoned at Jerusalem and then beheaded.
Andrew	Peter's brother. Laboured in many Asiatic nations. On arrival at Edessa, Syria, he was crucified.
Mark	Laboured in Egypt. At Alexandria he was pulled to pieces by a mob of idolaters.
Peter	Peter laboured mostly for the Jews. Finally in Rome he was arrested during Nero's reign and crucified upside down.
Paul	The chief apostle to the Gentiles who laboured incessantly in promoting the gospel. He was beheaded by Nero about 68 AD.
Jude (Thaddeus)	Crucified at Edessa in 72 AD.
Bartholomew	Laboured in several countries. Finally in India he was cruelly beaten and crucified by a mob of idolaters.
Thomas	Laboured in Parthia and India. He was martyred by Hindu priests, thrust through with a spear.
Luke	Laboured with St. Paul in various countries. Tradition says he was hanged from an olive tree by pagan priests in Greece.
Simon Zealotes	Laboured in Mauretania, Africa and Britain where he finally was crucified 74 AD.
John	Laboured in Asia Minor. Arrested and sent to Rome where at Domitian's command he was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil. He was miraculously preserved whereupon the emperor banished him to the lonely isle of Patmos.
Barnabas	It is claimed he was martyred in 73 AD
Nicodemus	Suffered death at Rome under Domitian.
Timothy	Laboured in Ephesus until 97 AD when he was clubbed to death by pagan people. ⁵

⁵ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. William Byron Forbush (Chicago: John C. Winston Co., 1926), 2-7.

Every apostle except John died a martyr's death, but through their endeavours the world of that day was 'turned upside down'. The church of the period of Ephesus truly laboured for Christ's sake and did not faint. As Dr. Vaughan declared:

*There is total patience and abhorrence of evil and discernment and again patience and endurance and unwearied exertion. What can be wanting here?*⁶

In the end, however, the early church began to falter. What was the issue that developed? As it transpired it was not sinfulness or heresy or compromise of their faith.

Christ's complaint

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. v4

This describes a decline in the zeal of God's people toward the end of this period. When did this waning commence? In all probability it began only after the death of most of the apostles. Saint Paul had warned

...after my departure...from among your own selves men will rise up speaking perverse things. Acts 20:28-31.

Paul was martyred about 68 AD. John wrote Revelation about 95 AD and in his day some false leaders were already in the church (3 John 9-10). It appears that within fifty years of the crucifixion the decline had commenced.

*Little by little a change came*⁷

Coldness had crept into the church. Zeal began to wane. Personal piety was declining.

*She became selfish and ease-loving. The spirit of worldliness was cherished.*⁸

Christ's warning

Remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent and do the first works; or else I will come to you quickly and I will remove your lamp stand from its place – unless you repent. v5

This passage depicts God's scheme for true revival within the church of God.

Remember...from where you have fallen...

Christ calls the believer to recount his past experience: their early love for Christ, remembrance of their original standards of conduct and their first labours for the faith to which they still adhere. If they recounted these aspects of their life they would realize how far they had fallen: they would see how love of self had replaced their love for Christ.

...repent...

The injunction is to seek for a change of mind and attitude, which the Holy Spirit will surely give, once it is sought with all the heart.

⁶ Edward B. Elliot, *Horae Apocalypticæ*, 5 ed. (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1862), Ch. 2.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), 8:26.

⁸ *Ibid.*,

...return (or reform) ...do the first works...

Let love be demonstrated by positive action. Love is the fulfilling of the law. Love is full-hearted obedience. To encourage repentance and reformation Christ warns of the consequences of non-repentance. He also commends them for their attitude toward false teachers.

...else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place...

The lampstands of the sanctuary were the bearers of light. The removal of the lamp stand indicated that it was no longer disseminating its brightness. So it is with regard to a church - the spiritual lampstand in the spiritual sanctuary now on earth – once it loses its love, it loses its light. Light and love are so closely allied..... *God is love; God is light.*

Therefore if a church fails to return to its first love it will have lost its light and be removed from the spiritual temple. Even if it continues to be a professing church of God it is not recognized as such by heaven.

The study of church history sadly reveals that every church through the centuries, if it has not been extinguished by martyrdom, has ultimately had its candlestick removed. Faith in Christ is not inherited: the natural tendency of the human heart is self-love.

Jesus said

He who endures to the end shall be saved. Matthew 24:13

Another commendation

You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. v6

Christ did not hate the people, however He was distressed by the things they did. Similarly with the early church – the true followers of Christ may have loved the sinner but they hated their sinful behaviour. Three of the early Church Fathers recorded the existence of a sect called the Nicolaitans in the second century AD. The Nicolaitans were also identified during the Pergamos period – in that period the Nicolaitans are described in detail.

Christ's appeal to all believers

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches... v7

In verse one it is Christ who speaks to the church. Here, however, it is the Spirit which speaks. What is the significance of this change? What it represents is the fact that the Holy Spirit is Christ's representative on Earth: He is the one and only Vicar of Christ.

When the Comforter has come... He will testify of me. John 15:26

...when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak on His own authority; but whatever He hears (from me) He will speak...

John 16:13

Believers should heed not only the lessons from Ephesus, but the lessons from each of the seven churches. The important fact to remember is that what Christ reveals concerning each church is also an important instruction for every saint, and for every church, of every age.

Main lessons from the Ephesus church letter

- God holds His true servants firmly in His hand.
- God takes note of our labours for His cause.
- God takes note of our attitude toward evil.
- The danger of a declining love for God and the growth of self love.

These words (Revelation 2:4-5) are applicable to... churches in their present condition. The love of God has been lost and this means the absence of love for one another. Self, self, self is cherished and is striving for the supremacy. God rebukes His people for their sins that He may humble them and lead them to seek His face⁹

Promise to the overcomer

To him who overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. v7

This passage prompts the question regarding what the believer must overcome. In the Ephesian period it meant responding to the call to remember, to repent and to return to one's first love. This meant the denial of self - which is the biggest battle for any believer in any age. The saint who gains this victory is regarded by God as having attained to completion of character. As one author of great spiritual discernment wrote

The sanctification of the soul by the working of the Holy Spirit is the implanting of Christ's nature in humanity...When self is merged in Christ, love springs forth spontaneously. The completeness of Christian character is attained when the impulse to help and bless others springs constantly from within.¹⁰

This is to be the aim, the daily prayer, of every true believer.

...eat of the tree of life...

This means immortality or deathlessness. Originally in Eden the Lord declared

And now, lest he [Adam] put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever. Genesis 3:22

God only (alone) has immortality. 1 Timothy 6:16

Therefore, in order to maintain immortality in the kingdom, the saved will continually eat of the tree of life.

Blessed are they who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life... Revelation 22:14

⁹ Ellen G. White, "The Need for a Revival and a Reformation," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Vol. 80, No. 8 (Feb. 25, 1902), 1.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, DC.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1900), 390-391.

...on either side of the river (of life) was the tree of life which bore twelve fruits, each (tree) yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing (service) of the nation. Revelation 22:2

...which is in the midst of the paradise of God...

In the original paradise the tree of life was in the midst of the garden (Genesis 2:9). The question then presents itself, is the original paradise of Eden the same one as the paradise that is promised to the saints in the heavenly future? This is answered in the exposition of Revelation 21 and 22. One thing is certain – the human race, *in Adam*, was banned from paradise and consequently from the tree of life. In Christ, however, the last Adam, all who believe and follow Him will be restored to paradise and to the tree of life and immortality.

Smyrna

The church fragrant to God

Revelation Chapter 2:8-11

Smyrna

Background

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things says the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life: v8

Meaning of Smyrna

Smyrna means *sweet smelling*. The sense of it is derived from myrrh, the Arabian herb, a source of aromatic ointment. When myrrh is crushed, it gives forth a beautiful fragrance. This was a perfect picture of the saints of the Smyrnan period. As a result of their martyrdom the saints were crushed, but their dying rendered a fragrant testimony to their faith in Christ. As a result of this witness, millions were convinced of the truth of the martyrs' faith and, as a result, these millions also accepted Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

Myrrh was also used to embalm the dead (John 19:39). In this period the church passed through an experience of death in which the church appeared to be weakened and effectively destroyed. Yet, in fact, this death experience actually preserved the church. It purged out corruption and selfishness, enabling the church to give forth a sweet-smelling fragrance through its expression of true Christian virtues.

Significance of Christ's titles

...the First and the Last...

As shown in Revelation One, this title was drawn from the Old Testament¹¹. The significance of the expression is incontrovertible: Christ is in complete control. He is the Victorious One. He is the first to gain the battlefield and He will be the last figure standing on that bloodied ground after the conflict is over. This image indicates the Saviour's complete victory. He is the one who is with His people amid the fires of martyrdom.

...who was dead and came to life

This expression reminded the saints of this period that hardships befalling them had also befallen Jesus. He had passed through an experience of death similar to their own tribulations, so was able to fully empathise with the sufferings of His people.

Christ's commendations

I know your... tribulation...

Smyrna represented the period of persecution under the pagan Roman Caesars. As the gospel spread throughout the empire the bastions of paganism began to crumble before the Christian onslaught. This brought a furious reaction from the established, vested religious interests. The rulers of the Roman Empire eventually turned upon the Christians and millions sacrificed their lives for Christ. The sites of the numerous martyrdoms can still be visited today; they include the Circus Maximus, the Coliseum and St Peter's Square. Sometimes Christians were tied to poles around the perimeter of coliseums, smothered with pitch and set on fire while fierce animals were released upon others who stood their ground in the centre of the arenas.

¹¹ A.P. Cooke, ed. *Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega*, 2nd ed. ed., Understanding Revelation (Sydney: Self-published, 2010), 17.

The remarkable poise, courage and steadfastness of the Christian martyrs was a testament to the power of Christ to sustain the faithful. The irony was that as a result of their witness multitudes were influenced to accept the gospel. As a consequence the saying *the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*, was coined.

I know ...your poverty...

This alludes to the fact that, short of martyrdom, the earthly possessions of believers were frequently confiscated by the state. Many Christians were forced into hiding and had to worship in the depths of the catacombs. Many others were driven out to distant places of safety, abandoning their homes forever. They suffered *the spoiling of their goods* Hebrews 10:34 AKJV. They were *destitute, afflicted, tormented* Hebrews 11:37.

...(but you are rich)...

The Smyrnians did not possess material riches, however they were spiritually wealthy. By their self-sacrifice they laid up treasure in heaven. Today, however, by way of contrast, the church is materially rich but spiritually it is *poor and blind and naked* Revelation 3:17. This is one of the great lessons of history. When the church is in adversity it is spiritually rich: when the church is affluent, it is spiritually poor. This explains, to some extent, why God permits persecution: it focuses the believer's mind on the most important aspect of existence, the spiritual dimension. It also explains why, to be fit for translation, the end-time church must first pass through a time of trouble that will enhance its spiritual focus.

...and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. v9

The word *Jew* means *praise* and originally the Jews were those of the tribe of Judah. This, then, could have applied to the literal nation of Jews due to their relentless hostility toward the gospel of Christ. However, the New Testament shows that since Calvary, the term has a spiritual connotation and applies now rather to believers in Christ.

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision (the mark of the literal Jew) that which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God. Romans 2:28-29

This indicates that the true, spiritual Jew is the one who has the praise of God.

If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:29

The term *Jew* has always been a deeply religious term, but Satan led the Hebrew people, especially their leaders, to bring the term into disrepute. Tertullian described the Jewish synagogues as *fountains of persecution*¹². He coined this expression because it was in the synagogues that the Jewish leaders hatched the slanderous plots against the Christians. In the Book of Acts the reader can discern the slanders the Jewish leaders fomented during their persecutions of the early Christians.¹³

The Jewish leaders inspired others to resist the gospel and they have continued to do so through the centuries. Their vicious lies instilled fear in the minds of the pagan peoples concerning the Christian faith, amongst other things leading the populace to blame the

¹² M.L. Andreasen, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine", in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, edited by Francis D. Nichol (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1957), 7:746.

¹³ See Acts 13:45; 14:2,19; 17:5,13; 18:5,6; 21:27 (New King James Version (NKJV)).

Christians for the natural calamities that fell upon society. The persecution of the apostle John by Emperor Domitian was in fact due to the false accusations by the Jews to the emperor. The Jews also played a leading role in the martyrdom of the saintly Polycarp, who was a devoted disciple of the apostle John.

*Even though he was to be burned on the Sabbath – the Jews were so anxious for Polycarp's death that they came in large numbers to the stadium bringing faggots for the fire in which Polycarp so magnificently died.*¹⁴

Satan is the primary instigator of lies and slander (John 8:44). Therefore the synagogues were described as of Satan because this was where the lying slanders against the saints were conceived and given birth. They truly were *a synagogue of Satan*. v9

Christ's admonition

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer...

The initial reaction we may have to this admonition is the sheer impossibility of achieving it. The thought of suffering, particularly martyrdom, naturally arouses fear: the instinct for self-preservation creates apprehension. However one of the astonishing characteristics of many martyrs is their courage while facing death. The reason is that when God calls a saint to witness for their faith through martyrdom the Holy Spirit extinguishes fear and grants courage which is derived from the supernatural. With that quality of faith they were able to unflinchingly face the lions.

...they did not love their lives unto the death. Rev 12:11

Tertullian wrote to the Roman leader

*Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust... the oftener we are mown down by you the more in numbers we grow; the blood of Christian is seed*¹⁵

...Indeed the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested and you will have tribulation ten days...

Thirteen Roman emperors initiated or supported the persecution of the Christians during their reigns. Of these ten predominated.

Roman emperors who persecuted Christians

98-117 AD - Trajan

During his reign there were many popular tumults against the Christians. Trajan issued an edict making adherence to Christianity a capital offence. Consequently there were many martyrs including Simeon, Bishop of Jerusalem and Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch.

117-138 AD - Hadrian

The spectators at the Roman games clamored for the killing of Christians. Hadrian decreed that Christians had to be tried and convicted before they could be executed.

¹⁴ Edwin E. Thiele, *Outline Studies in Revelation* (Angwin, CA.: Pacific Union College, 1990), 48.

¹⁵ Tertullian of Carthage, "The Apology," (197 A.D.).

http://books.google.com/books?id=q0hjnLpWVPoC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&ad=0#v=snippet&q=%22kill%20us%22&f=false

(accessed 22 Aug., 2010). 70

138 -161 AD - Antoninus Pius

Magistrates accused the Christians of impiety. In Asia-Minor Christians were held responsible for the numerous earthquakes and were attacked by the populace. Polycarp, the saintly Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred in 156 AD. Before the pyre was lit, the judge called on him to renounce Christ so as to save his life. Polycarp replied

*Eighty and six years have I been His servant and he hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?*¹⁶

The outcome of these persecutions was horrific: fifteen hundred Christians were slain on one occasion, eight hundred on another.

161-180 AD - Marcus Aurelius

The philosophers falsely accused the Christians of horrible crimes which included incest and feasting on the flesh of murdered children. As a result there were furious outbursts against the Christians, producing one of the most terrible periods of persecution. Churches were destroyed at Lyons and Vienne. In order to stem this outbreak of martyrdom a number of apologies were written on behalf of the Christians by figures such as Justin Martyr, Athenagorus and Tatian.

180 -192 AD - Commodus

The renunciation of paganism by the new Christians provoked further suffering and death. Persecution continued unabated during Commodus' reign.

193 -211 AD - Septimus Severus

Laws were enacted forbidding the propagation of the Christian faith and numerous Christians were killed throughout the provinces. Presidents were permitted to persecute Christians whenever they pleased.

222-235 AD - Alexander Severus

Even though Alexander Severus indicated that Christianity should be tolerated there were several instances of persecution during this period

235 -238 AD - Maximus

Many atrocities were perpetuated because Maximus incited the people and the magistrates to attack the Christians.

249-251 AD - Decius Trajan

Decius Trajan issued severe edicts against Christians and commanded the governors to utterly exterminate the Christian faith. Trajan's reign saw the worst of the martyrdoms to date.

251-253 AD - Gallus

Christians continued to be blamed for the various calamities and pestilences that afflicted the population. Persecution continued.

253-260 - Valerian

Christians were forbidden to meet in groups to worship. There were many martyrs.

¹⁶ Charles H. Hoole, trans., *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna* (1885), <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/martyrdompoly carp-hoole.html> (accessed 27 Jun., 2010), 9:3.

270-275 AD - Aurelian

Aurelian issued edicts of persecution against the Christians.

284-305 AD - Diocletian

One of the anomalies around the period prior to 303 AD meant there was a time of peace and tranquility for the Christians when some of the emperors were favourably disposed towards Christianity. Relatives of some emperors even accepted the Christian faith and many civil officials were Christians. There were huge congregations in almost every city: the faith flourished. However signs of degeneracy soon appeared within the Christian community. Rivalry and contention was rife among the bishops and the dissatisfaction filtered down to the church members themselves.

*Fraud, envy and malice prevailed in every congregation*¹⁷

Undoubtedly the unconverted were numerous within the church. To redeem its purity, God intervened. He permitted the rise of Diocletian who beset the church with fierce persecution.

During his reign Diocletian had become so inflated with pride because of his successes that he commanded that he himself should be worshipped as God. He claimed that he was brother to the sun and moon. Adorning his shoes with gold and precious stones, he commanded the people to kiss his feet¹⁸. Diocletian's demand introduced the fiercest period of persecution yet under the Caesars. It continued for ten years: from 303-313 AD. Because this prophecy employs symbolic terms, any time period mentioned should be interpreted as symbolic time. This period can therefore be understood as the fulfillment of the prediction that the Smyrnian church would have tribulation 'for ten days'. The *ten days* represents ten years on the basis that in symbolic prophecy a day represents a year.¹⁹

Diocletian:

- issued decrees to overthrow Christian temples throughout the Roman empire.
- issued a decree for the burning of the Christian scriptures.
- issued edicts for the replacement of Christians who occupied positions of responsibility, such as magistrates.
- ordered that elders and bishops be cast into prison and tortured in order to force them to engage in idol worship.²⁰

Examples of the faithfulness of the Christians

An example of their fidelity was in evidence when several thousand Christians assembled to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The temple where they were congregated was surrounded by pagans and the building locked up by the forces assembled outside. The Christians were called upon to offer incense to Jupiter or else be burned alive. The answer came from within: *We are all Christian. Christ is our only God and King. We will worship Him and His Father and the Holy Ghost and we are now ready to be offered to God.* The response of the pagans was tragically predictable. The temple was set alight and thousands of men, women and children were burned alive.

¹⁷ Edward Gibbon, 2:125.

¹⁸ John Foxe, 34.

¹⁹ See Ezekiel 4:6, Numbers 14:3-4.

²⁰ John Foxe, 34.

On another occasion the emperor sent an edict to a city in Phrygia commanding the citizens to worship the official idols. The mayor and his fellow leaders confessed that they, with all those in the city, were Christians. As a result the whole city was incinerated; its inhabitants were burned alive.

Eustratius of Arabrace witnessed the endurance of the martyrs and was so affected that he himself thirsted for martyrdom. When he openly professed his faith in Christ he was rebuked for his vanity and madness. He was arrested, cruelly beaten and burned alive.

The persecutions of that time were so great that some ancient authorities claimed that in Britain under Diocletian's persecution, *all the Christians were utterly destroyed.*²¹

In Portugal a beautiful maiden of noble birth by the name of Eulalia became a sincere and devout believer, turning her back on worldly pleasures. When persecution fell upon her fellow Christians, she took a bold stand on their behalf and through much prayer she was given a remarkable spirit of resistance. Her parents had to move to the countryside in order to save her from martyrdom. However Eulalia was so moved by the Holy Spirit that she stole away by night, traveling through harsh terrain and darkness until she reached Emerita, the city from whence her parents had fled. She confronted the tribunal and rebuked them for their slaughter of good people. She said

I am one of the Christians, an enemy of your devilish sacrifices. I spurn your idols under my feet. I confess God Omnipotent with my heart and mouth. Isis, Apollo, Venus! What are they? A thing of naught – the works of men's hands...The emperor falls down and worships a stone...go to therefore, burn, cut and mangle these earthly members. It is easy to break a brittle substance, but the mind you shall not hurt.

In fury the judge decreed

Hangman, take her! Pull her out by the hair of her head and torment her to the uttermost.

Then, sensing her youthful beauty, he changed his attitude and said

Wilt you kill yourself, so young a flower? Does not the glittering and golden pomp of a bridal move you? Behold, the instruments prepared for your terrible death. Either you shall be beheaded with this sword, or else with wild beasts pulled to pieces or be cast into a fiery furnace and be consumed to ashes.... If you will take with your fingers a little salt and incense and put it into the censors, you shall be delivered from punishment.

Eulalia did not reply, but instead threw down the idol and kicked over the incense. Her executioners took her, pulled her joints apart and used talons to tear the flesh of her side to the bone. Through it all Eulalia praised God with singing

Lord I will not forget thee. What a pleasure O Christ to remember your triumphant victories.

She continued singing without lament or weeping, full of cheer. Her executioners gored her flesh with an iron grate and hurdle and then burned her body with flaming torches. When the flame reached her head, she expired in peace.²²

²¹ Ibid., 30.

²² Ibid., 37-38.

In Gaul, a Roman legion comprising 6660 men was Christian to a man and led by a Christian called Mauritius. When the legion was ordered by the emperor to attack Christians the legion refused. In revenge the emperor executed every tenth soldier. The victims committed themselves to God *with great joy* encouraged by their leader Mauritius.

He was summoned to the emperor and in his defense declared

*We are your soldiers, but also the servants of God. We will rather obey Him than you. We offer our hands against any other enemy, but to defile our hands with the blood of innocents, that we may not do. Behold we cast down our weapons and resist not, for we would rather be killed than kill; and die guiltless than live guilty. We are ready to suffer fire and sword and any other torments. We confess ourselves to be Christians; we cannot persecute Christians, nor will we sacrifice to your devilish idols.*²³

The emperor subsequently ordered another tenth of the legion to be executed. When the remainder still refused to murder their fellow Christians, Caesar ordered the whole army to destroy the Christian legion. The Christian legionnaires made no resistance, yielding their lives to their persecutors and were slain.

What a telling testimony was borne by the early Christians! As the John the Revelator declared:

They overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. Revelation 12:11

It is abundantly clear that the saints were inspired to endure martyrdom by the power of the Holy Spirit. Often they appeared to deliberately invite death, so that some authors have made the mistake of claiming that the martyrs were overzealous and that many died needlessly.²⁴ The truth is that the martyrs were given supernatural boldness and courage as well as supernatural deliverance from pain.

*In vain were Satan's efforts to destroy the church of Christ by violence. The great controversy in which the disciples of Jesus yielded up their lives did not cease when these faithful standard-bearers fell at their post. By defeat they conquered. God's workmen were slain, but His work went steadily forward. The gospel continued to spread and the number of its adherents to increase. It penetrated into regions that were inaccessible even to the eagles of Rome... Thousands were imprisoned and slain, but others sprang up to fill their places... Their living example and dying testimony were a constant witness for the truth; and where least expected, the subjects of Satan were leaving his service and enlisting under the banner of Christ.*²⁵

It is our belief that in the future when God allows His people to become martyrs He will inspire men, women and children in the same way. These witnesses will boldly testify to the point of tempting death: even challenging their persecutors to martyr them. As in the past God will use the witness of such faith to save many that are still in spiritual Babylon.

²³ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁴ Stephen N. Haskell, *Seer of Patmos* (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1906), 52. "The tenderness of the father causes him to lose sight of the fact that death was sought... The overzealous oft times suffer when there is no need of suffering, yet God reads the motive of the heart..."

²⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1898), 41- 42.

Promise to the overcomer

...He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death. v11

What were the believers of the Smyrnian period to overcome or conquer? Without doubt it was the fear of suffering and death for the sake of Christ. The reward for overcoming meant they would not be *hurt by* (or experience) the second death. A review of Scripture reveals that it speaks of several kinds of death. There is spiritual death and physical death. Spiritual death represents the lack of spiritual life. *Dead in trespasses and sins Ephesians 2:1* is the lot of all who are not born again in Christ.

Literal or physical death is the cessation of physical life. Here there are two kinds of physical death. The first death is the result of the sin of Adam, the father of the race.

...in Adam all die... 1 Corinthians 15:22

Therefore just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin; and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned - Romans 5:12

The first death is temporary. From it all will return.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. John 5:28-29

Everyone comes back from the tomb – we have no say in the matter, no choice at all; everyone returns from the dead.

However we do have a choice as to when we come back! There are two main resurrections: the first resurrection and the second resurrection; the resurrection to life or the resurrection to damnation (or judgment and punishment). We *do* have a choice about which resurrection we participate in: those who are faithful to Christ return in the first resurrection, to eternal life.

Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power... Revelation 20:6

Those who return in the second resurrection, however, return for punishment: this punishment will be *the second death*. This resurrection transpires at the close of the one thousand years of Revelation chapter 20 and the death that ensues is destruction in the lake of fire. From this death there is no recovery.

And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God... And the dead were judged according to their works ...and Death and Hades (grave) were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone found not written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. Revelation 20:12-15

...the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. Revelation 21:8

The final fate of the unsaved is not eternal torment, but cessation of life, of total annihilation. This destruction is *everlasting destruction 2 Thessalonians 1:9*.

Thus the promise to the overcomer of the Smyrnian period of the church, and to Christians of all periods, is that they will take part in the first resurrection: on them the *second death will have no power*. They will be impervious to the forces of destruction forevermore; nothing will ever harm them again. What a comfort this truth is to the martyrs as they face their executioners. As Jesus counseled

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul (or character), but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Matthew 10:28

Pergamos

**The church
faithful amid popularity**

Revelation Chapter 2:12-17

Pergamos

Background

And to the angel (leader) of the church in Pergamos write... v12

Pergamos represents the period of the church when Christianity became popular. The Church often held an exalted position in society. This period undoubtedly commenced with the reign of Constantine the Great around 320 AD. At this time Satan changed his form of attack upon the church. Previously he had used persecution to defeat God's purpose; however this only served to purify, strengthen and grow the church. He was compelled to employ different tactics. He now made the church popular and in this was its great peril.

Meaning of Pergamos

The name Pergamos means *height* or *elevation*. The city of Pergamos was located on a three hundred meter high hill, making it ideal to defend.

Significance of Christ's title

...He who has the sharp two-edged sword: v12

As indicated by the author's exposition of Revelation 1:16, this title denoted the power of Christ's word, especially in the execution of judgment.

For the word of God is...sharper than any two-edged sword...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart...all things are naked and opened to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:12-13

Popularity breeds compromise of principle and Christ's title suggests that during this period when corruption would pervade the professed church, He would be all-discerning in regard to the condition of His professed people and would deal with them in judgment.²⁶

Christ's commendation

I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to my name, and did not deny my faith.... v13

The role of the city of Pergamos in Satan's strategy in opposing the cause of God is used to illustrate the problems of the saints in this period. In spite of the fact that believers were in a perilous position due to the popularity of the faith, Christ declares that the believers were faithful. However Pergamos was a place that was a powerful, thriving centre of paganism: where Satan had his seat or throne. It contained renowned memorials to idolatry. These were:

- The huge altar to Zeus, commemorating the Pergamene's victory over the invading Gauls, the remnant of whom were the Galatians
- The famous shrine and temple of Aesculopius, the serpent god of medicine

²⁶ The Pergamene period may correspond with the period of the Black Horse of Revelation 6. The rider is pictured as having *balances* in his hand. One application of balances in Scripture is *judgment*. See Daniel 5:27.

- The centre of worship for Dionysus, the bull god
- A prominent centre for the worship of Bacchus and Venus
- A great temple to Athena
- Temples to the Roman emperors Augustus, Trajan and Severus to whom were given divine honours.

Above all Pergamos was then the seat of Babylonian sun worship - the source of all idolatry, astrology and occultism. In 487 BC, fifty years after the Persians conquered Babylon, the Chaldean system of sun worship was compelled to flee from Babylon because of Persian hostility. They moved westward and established their centre in Pergamos, independent of Persian control.

The defeated Chaldeans fled to Asia Minor and fixed their central college at Pergamos and took the palladium of Babylon, the cubic stone, with them. Here independent of state control, they carried on the rites of their religion.²⁷

The original seat or throne of Satan had been in Babylon (Isaiah 14:4,12). Satan was Babylon's invisible king, however in 487 BC Pergamos became his earthly seat. The Pergamene kings embraced the Babylonian religion and assumed its leadership under the Babylonian title of Pontifex Maximus or Chief Pontiff. It became the state religion. In 133 BC, Attalus III bequeathed the kingdom of Pergamum to Rome with all its offices, both political and religious. This is how Satan's throne was transferred to Rome.

Julius and Augustus Caesar were the first to assume the title of Pontifex Maximus. Later the Christian emperor Gratian (380 AD) rejected the title, whereupon it was assumed by Pope Damasus and has ever since been one of the official titles of the Bishops of Rome. Pergamos therefore was the connecting link between the two Babylons.

The church of Pergamos represents Satan's change of tactics during the third period of Christian history. He now attacked the church, from within rather than from without. He transferred his throne from paganism to the Christian church. Instead of confrontation he resorted to infiltration. This was in exact fulfillment of the Apostle Paul's prediction in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8.

Let no one deceive you by any means: for that day (Second Advent) will not come unless the falling away (or apostasy) comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God (the Christian church) showing himself (or posing) that he is God. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-5.

The power that fulfilled this prediction has been identified through the centuries as the church at Rome. As one author has written

This compromise between paganism and Christianity resulted in the development of "the man of sin" foretold in prophecy... That gigantic system of false religion is a masterpiece of Satan's power - a monument of his efforts to seat himself upon the throne to rule the earth according to his will. The church... was induced to yield allegiance to the representative of Satan - the bishop of Rome... The same claim urged by Satan in the wilderness of temptation is still urged by him through the Church of Rome, and vast numbers are ready to yield him homage.²⁸

²⁷ William B. Barker, *Lares and Penates* (London: Ingram, Cooke and Co., 1853), 232-233.

²⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 50.

Pergamos was the period of the visible formation and establishment of the apostate church: the predicted Antichrist. With this period commenced the cleavage between Christians resulting in the withdrawal of a loyal minority of believers from the wider church.

Barker continues

After a long and severe conflict, the faithful few decided to dissolve all union with the apostate church if she still refused to free herself from falsehood and idolatry. They saw that separation was an absolute necessity if they would obey the word of God. They dared not tolerate errors fatal to their own souls and set an example which would imperil the faith of their children and children's children. To secure peace and unity they were ready to make any concession consistent with fidelity to God; but they felt that even peace would be too dearly purchased at the sacrifice of principle. If unity could be secured only by the compromise of truth and righteousness, then let there be difference, and even war.²⁹

The Pergamos period undoubtedly began with the accession of Constantine the Great, the first so-called Christian emperor, and concluded with Justinian in 538 AD. This was the period of amalgamation of church and state. However this apostate church was not the church addressed by Christ under the name of Pergamos. The true church of Christ was the separated faithful minority which held fast to Christ's name and who, unlike their brethren who had compromised their faith, did not deny the faith of Christ.

...even in the days when Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. v13

Who was Antipas? There is a tradition that Antipas was the martyred Bishop of Pergamos.³⁰ Probably the name has a symbolic application, just like Balaam and Jezebel in the Thyatira period. Antipas is formed of two words

Anti - in the place of, instead of, meaning a substitute or one against or in opposition. *Pas* - an abbreviated form of *pater* or *father*.

The use of the term *Father* in the religious realm denotes authoritarianism and is contrary to the spirit of Christ.

But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and all you are all brethren. Do not call any man on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.... And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. Matthew 23:8-12

With the development of the apostasy in this period an authoritarian hierarchy developed within the church that was contrary to the spirit of Christ. It developed primarily among the bishops of Rome, then spread to other church leaders. Finally it infected the pastors and leaders of local churches. Antipas can be seen to represent the faithful believers who stood firmly against the exercise of *kingly power* in the church: as a result being symbolically slain among the people. The true followers of Christ suffered character assassination; stigmatized, berated, and defamed. They were forced to become social outcasts and decided to dissolve all union with the apostate church.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Siegfried H. Horn, "Antipas", in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*, Edited by Don F. Neufeld, (Washington: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1960), 48.

Christ's complaint

...you have there those who hold to the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. v14

This is a reference to the experience at Baal-peor as recorded by Moses in Numbers 25.

Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel. Numbers 25:1-3

And Moses said to them: Have you kept all the women alive? Look, these women caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD. Numbers 31:15-16

Baal worship is sun worship. It is the worship of the principle of fertility and expressed itself in profane sexual practices. It had a powerful attraction to the natural impulses of man: it is why Israel was so frequently led into Baal worship.

The Revelator draws on this experience to picture what was taking place in the Pergamene period with many of God's professed people. Ancient Israel was led into literal whoredom and idolatry through Balaam's counsel. Spiritual Israel in the Pergamene period was led into spiritual whoredom by the counsel of false brethren within the church. These advocated friendship and compromise with apostasy. God's unequivocal counsel was clear:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?... And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?... Therefore "come out from among them and be separate. Do not touch what is unclean and I will receive you." 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

The Pergamene church tolerated in their midst those who advocated compromise with false worship. This was a popular attitude at the time; the church was lax in its stand. These false brethren were designated as Nicolaitans.

Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. v15

A number of manuscripts render the clause *which thing I hate* as *in like manner*, suggesting that the Nicolaitans held the doctrine of Balaam.³¹

The words *Nicolaitan* and *Balaam* have almost identical meanings –

Nicolaitan is Greek comprising *niko* (conqueror) and *laos* (people) = conqueror of the people

Balaam is Hebrew and comprises *belang am* (destroyer of the people)

³¹ The Syriac, Vulgate and three oldest biblical manuscripts render the clause *which things I hate* as *in like manner*. See also Rev. Boyd Carpenter, "The Revelation of St. John", 2:15 in *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, W. Sanday, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1981).

The Nicolaitans are first mentioned in the Ephesian church letter:

...you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. Revelation 2:6.

But in the Pergamene period these same people were now right inside the church. This reveals the snare of tolerance. It is important for believers to learn what can be tolerated in the church and what should not be. To tolerate what God hates is grievous to Him and will injure the church.

What were the deeds and doctrines of the Nicolaitans? The Nicolaitans could be likened to the liberals of the early church. They abused the Apostle Paul's emphasis of God's free grace. They misinterpreted *not under the law* to mean *not under the standard or direction of the law* instead of *not under the condemnation or curse of the law*. As a result, they adopted a false freedom which led to licentiousness, expounding sexual freedom. As Peter declared:

having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls... They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness... 2 Peter 2:14-16

For certain men have crept in unnoticed...ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness (sexual freedom) and deny the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.... Jude 4

Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and have perished in the rebellion of Korah. Jude 11

The Nicolaitans according to some scholars were Gnostics.

The Nicolaitans were a Gnostic sect who mistakenly traced their origin back to Nicholas, one of the seven deacons (Acts 6:5). They held certain impure doctrines and lived impure lives... They held to the pernicious principle that the lower passions were subdued by indulgence.³²

Christ's warning

Repent...

The church of Pergamos was guilty of tolerating the teachings and practices of the Balaamites or Nicolaitans. How often has the church of God needed this same warning? And how often has the church become too tolerant and compromised its principles? Today, the church under the pretext of Christian love tolerates false doctrine, worldliness and transgression of God's commandments. Those who protest against these abuses are branded as trouble makers, intolerant and lacking in Christian love. However the question remains: Who does Christ commend? Christ commends those who like Antipas lift up their voices in protest against spiritual declension within the church. And yet, like Antipas, they often suffer character assassination with their reputations seemingly destroyed.

...or else I will come to you quickly...

It is apparent that Christ will come to Pergamos in judgment and remove its lampstand if it does not repent. (See the author's exposition of Revelation 2:5 above).

³² Edwin E. Thiele, 39.

...and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. V16

This refers to the Nicolaitans or Balaamites. The expression appears to be borrowed from Moses' account of the experience of Israel in Numbers 25, where those who led Israel astray were literally slain with the sword.

So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Every one of you kill his men who were joined unto Baal of Peor." And indeed one ... presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and....all the congregation... who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle... Now when Phinehas, the son of Eleazar... saw it, he rose... and took a javelin... and thrust both of them through ... So the plague was stopped... And those who died in the plague were twenty four thousand. Numbers 25:5-9.

This is a graphic warning to spiritual Israel. All who persist in compromising with the world, committing spiritual adultery (James 4:4), are to be dealt with by the spiritual sword of the Spirit – the word of God – and severed from among God's people. This will stay the plague of the judgments of God upon spiritual Israel.

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, was rewarded for his zeal by being granted the covenant of an everlasting priesthood.

...Phinehas...has turned back my wrath from...Israel, because he was zealous with my zeal among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in my zeal... 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace... the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel. Numbers 25:10-14

In spiritual Israel those who zealously resist the spiritual Balaamites or Nicolaitans will likewise be rewarded by being granted a spiritual priesthood for eternity. They will be made *kings and priests unto God. Revelation 1:6.*

Promises to the overcomer

...To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat...

The *hidden manna* is an allusion to the pot of manna preserved inside the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies of the earthly sanctuary. Exodus 16:31-35. It was *hidden manna* because it could not be seen, except possibly by the High Priest, and even then then only once a year.

This manna was incorruptible, preserved in the ark for forty years in the wilderness and for over eight hundred years in the Promised Land. That was until approximately 586 BC when the ark and its contents were hidden by the prophet Jeremiah in a secret cave east of Jordan.³³

Manna was food from heaven and all-sufficient. It gave life and it kept its consumer free from disease. It represents the spiritual food of the believer (John 6:48-63), the Word of God. This Word is described in Scripture as hidden:

*Your word I have hidden in mine heart, that I might not sin against You.
Psalm 119:11.*

I have food to eat of which you do not know. John 4:32

³³ The Apocrypha, 2 Maccabees 2:4-8 in Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1917), 453.

I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food. Job 23:12.

...your life (spiritually) is hidden with Christ in God. Colossians 3:3

This promise to the overcomer represents the fact that in the Kingdom the essentials to maintain life and health will be provided throughout eternity.

...And I will give him a white stone...

This is an allusion to the Urim stone – a glittering diamond upon the breastplate of the high priest. Urim means light, which implies *white* in colour. On the Urim a secret name of God was written. The Urim stone was provided for special communication between the High Priest and God. When the priest made an inquiry of God, and the answer was in the affirmative, a bright light would illuminate the Urim.

...and on the stone a new name written...

The significance of the new name is that it represents the altered character and status of a person who experiences the new birth and becomes an overcomer, partaking of *the hidden manna* – the new spiritual life.

In the Old Testament the giving of a new name represented the bestowal of honour, promotion and elevation. When Joseph was elevated to be prime minister of Egypt, his name was changed to Zaphnath-Paaneah, *The man to whom secrets are revealed* (Genesis 41:45). When Daniel was elevated to stand in the king's house, his name was changed to Belteshazzar (Daniel 1:7). When Jacob was elevated to be a prince with God, his name was changed to Israel (Genesis 32:27-28).

To the overcomer this is a promise that he will be elevated to a distinguished position in the kingdom and that he will enjoy an especially close relationship with the Godhead – an access that is intimate and special. When one contemplates the multiplied millions of beings who surround the Father, such a promise is deeply significant. Because of their close and intimate relationship with the Godhead, overcomers will obtain the hidden manna – they will share in a spiritual feast.

In this earthly realm, to be invited to share an intimate meal with the monarch or president of a nation would be a special privilege. How much greater a privilege it will be in the Kingdom to be granted an audience with the Father, knowing that He loves us and will enjoy our company. What anticipation! And while in the Kingdom we will have literal, visible fellowship with our heavenly Father, we have this privilege already in a spiritual sense through secret prayer.

...which no one knows except him who receives it. v17

This alludes to the fact that the experience of spiritual rebirth and subsequent transformation of character can only be understood by personal experience. It cannot be understood by observation only.

Appendix A – Parallels between Balaam and Pergamos

The false prophet Balaam is typical of the apostate church in the period of Pergamos (refer to Numbers 25). This table compares Balaam with the Pergamene apostate church.

Balaam	Apostate church (Pergamos)
Balaam was once true to God.	The professedly Christian church was once true to God.
Balaam was overcome by the spirit of covetousness	The church was overcome by the spirit of popularity, covetousness – wealth and power.
Balaam was offered a rich reward by Balak, king of Moab, to ruin Israel.	The church leaders were offered rich rewards by Constantine if they compromised their faith, thereby ruining the church
Balaam finally was enticed by the reward and united with Balak	The church compromised and accepted the support of the civil power, thereby uniting church and state
Balaam was warned by a special messenger - to no avail	The church leaders were warned and opposed by a loyal minority (Antipas) but to no avail.
Balaam was counseled to lure Israel astray by an idolatrous feast and immoral pleasure	Church leaders lured members from Christ by compromise with paganism which is spiritual adultery
Those who led Israel astray were slain with the sword.	Christ will fight against those who lead spiritual Israel astray <i>with the sword of His mouth.</i>
Those who refused to eat things sacrificed to idols were saved and continued to eat of the manna from heaven	Those who rejected the spiritual food of the spiritual Balaamites were saved from spiritual death and continued to eat of the hidden manna, the pure word of God

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