

## Revelation Class 7

2:8-17

### The letters to the churches of Smyrna and Pergamum

By way of review and reflection, the number of letters is not random. Seven is a number signifying completeness. These letters are immediately relevant and written to specific churches in specific situations but they also have relevance to the rest of the churches...much like Paul's letters to his churches. We read them and seek to understand what was said, and why, so that we might learn to live by God's Word in our own time and circumstances. We believe that like the OT, these things were written not just for their benefit but for 'our benefit'. See Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11.

The two texts primarily in view in the letter to the church in Smyrna are Daniel 1 and Isaiah. What comes into view later and in light of this letter is the "The Martyrdom of Polycarp". Again, John introduces Jesus, risen, ascended, and reigning in light of some features of the original vision. Here He appears as the 'first and last, the one who died and came to life. "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'The words of the first and last, who died and came to life'." Jesus' sovereignty over history and eternity is the basis of the comfort and hope John extends to the church in Smyrna. Vv.9-11 "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death."

## **Revelation Class 7**

### **2:8-17**

#### **The letters to the churches of Smyrna and Pergamum**

The contrast of poverty due to religious discrimination and persecution and spiritual wealth is seen in the Sermon on the Mount. Mt 5:3,5,6. Note again, for the second time, John declares that the tribulation period is present and not exclusively future as he did in 1:9.

But in v.9 we see a controversy and separation from Jews in the midst of the rising hostility of Rome and Greco-Roman society in general. Judaism enjoyed a legal status of protection as a religio-licita, or permitted religion. Roman disdain and oppression if not outright persecution began in AD 19. Jews and Christians remained in connection in the diversity of Judaism until about AD 66 when the Jewish revolt began. When Rome massed troops to put down the rebellion the Christians of Judea and Jerusalem in particular heeded Jesus' words and fled Jerusalem and did not defend the Temple, see Mt 24:15ff. They fled across the Jordan to a place known as Pella. This created a breach between Jewish people and Christians, which frankly has never healed. Jesus told believers to flee and not fight but this was aggravated when it was repeated early in the second century with the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 when the Christians fled again. John is writing after the first breach but before the second.

What we are seeing being played out on the Turkish border today is very much germane to our discussion tonight. With the slaughter of many thousands of Christians, Yazidis, and Kurds immanent, what are the Turkish troops doing? We see earlier tendencies in Acts 13:45,50; 14:2-7,19; 17:5-9; I Thess 2:14-16. The play on words here between 'slander' and Satan, the adversary and false accuser is key to feeling and understanding the antipathy between Christians and Jews at this point. Jews could have helped protect Christians but not only did not but actually pointed them out to the Romans...saying they are not part of us and hence not under legal protection. Pressure on Christians to conform would have increased under the reign of Domitian AD 81-96. Those refusing to conform would be seen as politically disloyal and unpatriotic and would have faced threats of exile or capital punishment. But genuine Christian believers could never call anyone but Jesus Lord or Savior.

## Revelation Class 7

2:8-17

### The letters to the churches of Smyrna and Pergamum

V.10 The command to fear not in the face of suffering, and the threat of the devil throwing believers into prison to be tested for 10 days sends us to where this happened before...Dan 1:12ff with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and Daniel. Here the issue is eating the King's food at his table. Why did Daniel and his friends refuse to do it? Discuss...Can you see why John and or Jesus take the church of Smyrna to this scripture? John is seeking to encourage that the period of trial is definite and limited but that the reward is eternal and unlimited.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life...see Jas 1:12. Nevertheless, many may suffer and some may even die. Because God is in control of all things, even death is in his hands, and represents a divine test, see I Cor 11:19. Christ is so completely sovereign that the devil's efforts actually serve God's ends...proving believers' faith and faithfulness. Further, it distinguishes between true and false Israel.

V.11 Again we have the Isianic reference to Is 6:9,10 about preaching rescuing some and hardening others. And Finally, the promise to the conquerors who will conquer as their Master did, and shall not be hurt by the 'second death'. See 19:12 and 20:6, 14, 21:8. Conquering looks ironic because earthly defeat actually means heavenly triumph and life. May also be a play on words with the term for conquer being nikao...recalling Nicolaitans.

2:12-17 And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, "the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword". "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; you hold fast to my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have this against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality. So hear what the Spirit says to the churches. "To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it."

## Revelation Class 7

2:8-17

### The letters to the churches of Smyrna and Pergamum

Again I am thinking that the angel is an angel, perhaps over the congregation but more likely over the church in the city. Here Jesus is depicted as the one with the two-edged sword. As in Smyrna, Satan is named as the instigator of persecution. Pergamum is named as the seat of pagan religion in the region. It was the first city to build a temple to a Roman ruler, Augustus and it became the Temple warden for entire Imperial cult in the region. It was also a center for the cult of Aesclepius, the serpent god of healing, also Zeus, Athene, Demeter, and Dionysius were worshipped there. Satan's throne was a reference to the Acropolis, which was the site of many temples and throne-like altar of Zeus relatedly, see 13:2 and 16:10 as Satan gives the Beast his throne and great authority. Here John is seeing and understanding this church in light of Numbers 24:14 and the seduction of Israel through false teaching leading them into not only compromise but overt idolatry and immorality, Balaam is the emblem from Israel's past. The threat He issues is that He will come and make war against the false teachers and false teaching with the Sword of His mouth. Recalling Numbers 22:23, 31 and Joshua 13:22. See also Deut 23:4; Neh 13:2; 2 Pet 2:14-16; Jude 5-12. The church is condemned for tolerating false teaching. According to Jewish tradition, Balaam perished with the kings of Midian, when he was killed by the Israelites in Num 31:8; Josh 13:21-22 because he had returned to collect his reward for offering counsel against them and tempting them into idolatry and porneia immorality...as well as feasting see Num 25:1-2.

## **Revelation Class 7**

**2:8-17**

### **The letters to the churches of Smyrna and Pergamum**

The names of the Nicolaitans may be derived from nikao linked to overcoming and Balaam is linked to Hebrew word Bl''m meaning he who consumes or devours. If the church can overcome their sin of toleration and execute discipline Christ promises them an inheritance.

Those who refuse to participate in the idolatrous feasts will be rewarded with the Feast of the hidden manna, now and ultimately at the end. Jesus commends them for not denying their faith even in the face of persecution. Some even died in Pergamum, like Antipas, 'my witness, my faithful one'. Any Christian that maintained a high profile would likely reap some form of persecution either politically, socially, or religiously driven. The implicit assertion is that Christ's throne takes precedent over Satan's throne. Nevertheless, the church is indicted for harboring a group of false teachers who encouraged participation in idol feasts by teaching that such conduct was permissible for Christians. The white stone recalls the stone tickets used in the ancient Greco-Roman world for theatres and athletic events but it also recalls the appearance of manna itself as described in Ex 16:31 and Num 11:7. Further the whiteness is a hint at holiness in many places in the Bible. Similarly to be given a new name is a mark of blessing, like Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah, Jacob/Israel, Simon/Peter, etc. See also Is 62:2ff; 65:15. This new name Israel's new married status, new kingly status and restoration into Yahweh's covenantal presence. The new name represents the eschatological new identity of the redeemed in the new heaven and new earth.