

Sent: Wednesday, October 6, 2021 8:38 PM
Subject: Last Nite's MOB Study on Revelation 2:8-17

"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him!" (James 1:12)

Two weeks ago, we learned how the resurrected Son of God, Jesus Christ, now in heaven, appeared to His beloved disciple, John, in a vision that was so vivid and overpowering that he "fell down at His feet like a dead man"! And after being touched by the One he described as "one like the Son of Man" (the name often used of Jesus Christ while on earth), he was brought to his senses, told "not to be afraid," and instructed to write about "the things that he had seen, the things that are, and the things that will be"--and to include them in a book we now know as the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ!

Last week we began our study of the second part of the book of Revelation, about "the things that are"--about the "seven churches," which were representative of all the Christian churches in that day, and in every day since that day! It began with Christ speaking "to the angel of the church of Ephesus."

Remember? How Jesus commended the church for how they "persevered and endured hardships for His name's sake;" and "didn't grow weary in well-doing;" and demonstrated great discernment when it came to identifying false teacher and heresies--and how they "abhorred evil" (particularly the evil of the Nicolaitans), and remained sound in doctrine and practice? But He also reprimanded them for "leaving their first love" (including their love for Jesus) and warned them that He would "remove their lampstand out its place" (which would mean no longer shining as a light in a darkened world)--unless they repented and "did the deeds they had done at the first"! We don't know for sure whether or not they repented, but we do know that both the city of Ephesus, and the church of Ephesus, are in a state of ruin today! And, sadly, that the church of Ephesus will always be remembered as the "loveless church"! (We certainly don't want our church, or any of us, personally, to ever be remembered that way!)

Then last night, we looked at two more of the seven churches our Lord addressed--the church of Smyrna, and the church of Pergamum!

Scripture doesn't record the founding of the church of Smyrna, like it does the church of Ephesus, nor even mention it in the book of Acts! But we know from other sources that the city of Smyrna itself was considered one of the most beautiful cities in Asia Minor, located on the gulf of the Aegean Sea, some 50 miles north of Ephesus. It was the center of science and medicine, and some believe the home of Homer, the poet! But it also served as a "hotbed of Emperor worship"! In fact, under Domitian, it became a capital offense not to offer a yearly sacrifice to the emperor. And, not surprisingly, many Christians, in the church of Smyrna faced persecution and even execution--among them, the noted Polycarp, who was mentored by John himself, apparently became the "bishop of the church" and, 50 years after John's death, was burned at the stake for refusing to worship Caesar!

In fact, the church of Smyrna became known as the "persecuted church"! Jesus knew all about the "tribulation and poverty" they suffered and were about to suffer--along with the slander heaped upon them by the "Jews who were not Jews," who occupied a "synagogue of Satan"! But He proclaimed them "rich" (spiritually speaking--where it counts!) and challenged them to remain "faithful unto death"--noting that "he who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death," and promising them a "crown of life" (analogous to the wreath awarded winning athletes in the "games of ancient Rome").

Jesus' identification of Himself as the "first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life" must have been encouraging words to these Smyrna believers who were undergoing great persecution, and testing, realizing that they were, in fact, in the hands of the One who had conquered death! And it must have reminded John of the death-defying words of Jesus that he himself had earlier recorded (in John 11:25-26) after the "calling forth" and raising of Lazarus: "I AM the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die...!"

As to the reference to "Jews who were not Jews"--the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 2:28-29: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter!" (And, if you wonder, the Jewish synagogue is called a "synagogue of Satan" because of its rejection of their Messiah as well as their opposition to the message of the church!)

Interestingly, the church of Smyrna, along with the church of Philadelphia, were the only two churches which received no retribution--because of how they "remained steadfast under trials"!

And speaking of words of retribution, we next hear the words of Christ spoken to the church of Pergamum--the "compromising church"! With Christ identifying Himself as "the One who has the sharp two-edged sword" (coming out of His mouth)!

"I know where you dwell," He told them--"where Satan's throne is"! (MacArthur says Pergamum was the "headquarters of Satanic opposition!") And yet, there are some amazing words of commendation to the church! "You hold fast My name and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you! Where Satan dwells!" Wow!

And because so many others died there for their faith in Christ, it's apparently where the term "martyr" was "born"! "Martyr" meaning "witness"!

And yet, some in the church "held to the teaching of Balaam (a false prophet in Old Testament days, you can read about in Numbers 22-32) who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality...and some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans!" MacArthur notes that the Nicolaitans followed the teaching of Nicolas, who was made a deacon, but was really a false believer, who became "apostate" and used his position to lead the church astray, "assaulting the church with sensual temptation and a life of self-indulgence, perverting grace and replacing liberty with license"!

The big problem was that the church of Pergamum (presumably the leaders of the church) tolerated the sin of the "some"! And, as a result, the whole church suffered! And, sadly, the church became identified as the "compromising church"!

"Hear what the Spirit says to the churches! Repent, or else I am coming to you quickly with the sword of My mouth" (signifying judgment to those who attack His people and destroy His church)! Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the Word of God is living and active ("quick and powerful") and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intents of the heart!"

And yet, there's always (still?) opportunity to get it right! And for them (and us) a promise: "to him who overcomes," says the Lord, "I will give him the hidden manna (the bread of heaven)...and a white stone...with a new name written on it..." Picturing, perhaps, the ancient Roman custom of awarding white stones, with names written on them, to the victors of athletic games, as tickets to the entrance of a special awards banquet! You see the connection!

"But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord!"

Hear the Word of the Lord to the churches!

Lowell