

This morning we covered grounding truths in understanding God's letters to the seven churches of Revelation.

- The letters are to **literal churches** of the day; God speaking into real life.
- The challenges they faced are the **same ones churches face today**; just in a different twist.
- The attitudes, beliefs, and practices God praised in them, **He still praises** in churches today; and the things that were leading to the church's death, still kill churches today. **Spiritual truth and principles are timeless.**
- Everything said; praises and **warnings are every bit as real** and personal for us today.
- The best way to understand is to start by **looking into the lives of those original churches.** That is the **first part of our mission.** The second challenge tonight is discussing how their situations and messages, **apply to us.**

We looked at the church in Ephesus; they had learned to **see through God's eyes** but **not feel with God's heart**; the result was, they **"lost their first love."** Love of God and humanity is indivisible, so basically, they had grown cold to everything.

We said that the cities are listed in order of how a messenger would travel, so we continue the messenger's route to the next two cities.

Smyrna

Revelation 2

8. "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:**

9. "I know your **works, tribulation, and poverty** (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are **Jews and are not,** but are a synagogue of Satan.

10. "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

11. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. **He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.**" '

As we move on to Smyrna, the theme for this church is different; it is life and death. Let's see how this personal to them.

Smyrna competed as a top city with Ephesus. But it has an interesting history. It was a Greek city that was **completely destroyed in 580 B.C.** Some two centuries later, it was rebuilt in one, comprehensive plan. It was in effect, brought back from death. Unfortunately, it would be a place of fierce suffering again in the Middle Ages under a Persian/Mongol conqueror (Timur).

It was one of the **first cities to embrace emperor worship** and they had a huge temple to that effect. They also had a **Jewish community that was violently opposed to this new "Christian sect."** We get an idea how long and deeply they were opposed by the fact they martyred the renowned church father, Polycarp, who was the bishop there. An indicator of how deeply they hated the church is their surprising step to execute a notable person without government sanction. Usually, the Jewish community wisely avoided such risks.

Smyrna is only one of two cities **not to be rebuked by God**. God acknowledges their **poverty** that was caused mainly by the powers of the Jewish community. The idea of life and death resonated with these people because their city was founded on it; they were constantly in danger of it, and there was a lot of unjust suffering going on. And into the Dark Ages, there was more to come.

If any church had the **cards stacked against them**, it was Smyrna, and yet they **show that it is possible to stay true Christians even in worst of situation**.

So what's God's promise to them? The promise is not that they will eventually become prosperous, not even assurance of avoiding death; but that they would avoid the "second death."

➤ WHAT TRAITS OF SMYRNA RESONATE WITH YOU?

➤ HOW DO THEIR SITUATION, CHALLENGES AND BLESSINGS APPLY TO US?

Pergamum (Pergamos)

Revelation 2

12. "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, `These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:

13. "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 even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

14. "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold 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.

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

16. `Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

17. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it." "

Of all the cities we explore today, I think this one is the most fascinating. It couldn't compete with the other cities in commercial greatness, but it was **unsurpassed as a cultural center**. Its library held over 200,000 parchments; in fact, the word "parchment" is derived from this city's name. It regarded itself as the **"custodian of the Greek way of life and worship."**

It was a city of some 200,000 people, it was the **capital city in the area**, and it took its Caesar worship more seriously than anywhere else. It was a principal center for the imperial cult in this region.

It had **many temples**, but the grandest was dedicated to Zeus and stood on the conical hill 800 feet above the city. It was said that the great **temple stood out on a ledge of rock, looking like a giant throne**. Night and day, anyone in the city could look at see the smoke of the sacrifices dominating the sky.

This massive **altar of Pergamon** has an interesting history. It inspired the **Greek ruler, Antiochus Epiphanies in 167 B.C. to build an altar over the Jewish altar** in Jerusalem and sacrifice a pig in the

Temple. This was prophesied by Daniel ([Dan. 9:27](#)), some four centuries earlier called, “the **Abomination of Desolation**.” In Matthew 24:15 Jesus uses that term again speaking of a similar event in the end times, undoubtedly, and even greater event.

In 1878, a German archaeologist named **Carl Humaan excavated the altar of Pergamon** and it so impressed **Hitler that he had a pulpit designed after it** and used it for all the Nazi rallies. After the loss of some 80 million lives, Russia took the altar of Pergamon to Leningrad. Incidentally, this happened in 1948, the same year Israel was reestablished after 2000 years. Through some 22 centuries, this altar has been tied to the “Abomination of Desolation” and the suffering of God’s people.

The city was a Roman capital, so it hosted the **Proconsul who held the power of the sword**, meaning, judgments to execute came from this city. It was a place that was political, powerful, and terribly corrupt.

What God said *to*, and *about* this place ominously **fits the past, present, and future**.

Christ reminds the church there, that it is really **He** who has the power of the sword; one far greater than the judicial system of Pergamum.

The other cities were powerfully pagan, but this one **hosts “Satan’s throne.”** It would have been powerful imagery, the looming temple on the hill; the extreme worship of Caesar, and the pagan temples that were all over. Satan was tangibly on a throne there.

The Nicolaitans were there as well, the “progressive liberals” of the church. As we covered, they promoted a greater religious openness with no sexual boundaries.

But we also have the **doctrine of Balaam** mentioned as a separate entity, also endangering the church from within. **How are they different that the Nicolaitans?** If you remember the story from Numbers 22, 23, there was a man who had a relationship with God, by the name of Balaam. Long story short, the Moabites paid him to try and curse the Israelites. “Balaam’s Error” as it became known; was basically selling out a relationship with God for the rewards of the world. -And selling out means bringing harm to God’s people (particularly through seduction); the seduction was really; **to fit in at any cost.**

The pressure to fit in would have been enormous in a political cesspool like Pergamum. The reward for those who stand against it would resonate with the Christian/ Hebrews of that church. The **imagery of the “hidden manna”** would have reminded them of a legend of Jeremiah. When Solomon’s temple was destroyed, it was said that Jeremiah hid a pot of manna in a cleft in Mount Sinai, so it would not be corrupted or defiled. Legend says that Jeremiah prophesied that when the Messiah came, He would return the pot of manna. In effect, **that is exactly what happened**; Jesus told us that He is the real manna come down from heaven. ([John 6:33](#))

The hidden manna was powerful imagery that God can hold back the corrupting power of Satan, even at the foot of Satan’s throne. Their promise was their incorruptible Savior Himself.

The promise also **included a “white stone” with a new name** known only to God and the person receiving it. What does this mean?

There are a number of ways a special stone would have been a powerful image to people in the ancient world; they all would have **something to do with a position in life**.

The white stone symbolized a position of acceptance and innocence. Votes of a jury would be done with white and black stones; the white stone being a vote for innocence. In a political matter, it would be a vote for acceptance.

The stone symbolized a priestly position. Tradition was for the Jewish priest to wear a stone with a name on it that only he knew. The secret name wasn't for him, but for God. It's an interesting thought; God has over 200 names in the Bible, Savior, Provider, Protector, and many more. If you wore a white stone, what would be your personal name for God?

Peter's letters were probably written some 10 years earlier, to people in this region; so his words undoubtedly came to mind:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

The white stone as a sculpted special stone; a *tessera* carried even more images:

The stone symbolized a position of privilege. Patrons of a great Roman house might carry a tessera. The stone was kind of a cross between a credit card and a badge. It allowed the holder special privilege based on the authority of that house.

The stone symbolized the position of glorious victory. Both the Greeks and the Romans took their sports very seriously. Pergamon was both. A victor at the public spectacle or a noted gladiator would receive a tessera as a reward for his victory.

Victory, privilege, innocence, acceptance, and priesthood were all tied up in the image of the white stone; and not just at the hand of man, but from the hand of God. Imagine what this would mean to those in a culture at the foot of Satan's throne; to those who were persecuted and seen as Paul said to the Corinthians:

We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world--right up to this moment. (1 Cor. 4:13)

The letters are deeply personal, they reflect God understanding real believers in a real world, and yet they are as timeless as they are real. Churches still do the same things wrong, still face the same challenges, and still grow closer to God by doing the same things right.

- WHAT TRAITS OF PERGAMON RESONATE WITH YOU?
- HOW DO THEIR SITUATION, CHALLENGES AND BLESSINGS APPLY TO US?