

Revelation - Commentaries by Ebenezer John Thomas

Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos, Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos: Part 1

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Ephesus is a name of note in the history of the church, and amongst the other churches of Asia. God wrought special miracles there by the hand of Paul; so that from his body were brought unto the sick, handkerchiefs or aprons, and the dis-eases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them. From Ephesus all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks. The church there was highly privileged, enjoying for three years continuously the ministry of the great apostle of the Gentiles, the man who had been in the third heaven (Acts 19:10; 20:31; 2 Cor. 12:2), and only in the Epistle to the Ephesians does Scripture give, in its full height, the doctrine of the church, To the elders of Ephesus, Paul delivered his weighty final charge, in which he warned them of what would take place after his departure; not only grievous wolves entering in among the flock, but of their own selves men arising speaking 'perverted things.'

The Lord, too, in the address to Ephesus, assumes a general character, which might apply to any or all of the churches. "To the angel of the assembly in Ephesus write: These things says he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lamps."

This is appropriate to the first of the seven churches, which, in some respects, is representative of the church in general, while in several of the following epistles the Lord takes a special character corresponding to the state of the particular church. Here He holds the seven stars in His right hand. It is salutary to remember this. All who exercise subordinate rule and ministry in the church are in the right hand of Christ. They may have no human ordination, but if truly Christ's servants, the blessing of the flock is to recognize them and show a sympathetic attitude toward their labors. "We beg you, brethren, to know those who labor among you, and take the lead among you in the Lord, and admonish you, and to regard them exceedingly in love on account of their work" (1 Thess. 5:12, 13). What a steadying influence too it has, to remember that Christ walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: His feet like fine brass as burning in a furnace. Yes! there is One always walking about, so to say, amongst us, treading out, with feet of burning judgment, all sin and evil.

The warnings of Paul in Acts 20. to the Ephesian elders, do not appear to have failed of effect. For here, in the Epistle to Ephesus, the Lord specially commends the assembly's faithfulness in these respects: "I know thy works and [thy] labor and thine endurance, and that thou canst not bear evil [men]; and thou hast tried them who say they are apostles and are not, and hast found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). Works and labor are not exactly synonymous. Works are definite acts done; labor the exertion which produces them. The work may give but a small indication of the labor it required. A long journey on a cold night—inconvenient and perhaps painful—may be taken for only a small work at the end. The Lord assures us that He knows the work and the labor.

The Lord commends, inferentially, what had been their early fervor; but it was a fervor which they were allowing to wane: "Thou... endurest and hast borne for my name's sake, and hast not wearied: but I have against thee that thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, whence thou hast fallen, and repent and do the first works; but if not, I am coming to thee, and will remove thy lamp out of its place, except thou shalt repent" (vers. 3 5). There is only one thing against Ephesus: "Thou hast left thy first love." But that is the root of declension, either in a church or an individual. A sin into which a Christian may fall, is merely the outward tact; there had been failures in secret before the outward transgression was allowed to appear. But independently of this, it is precious to know that the Lord values the saints' heart-devotion. At Ephesus there was a great deal that was most excellent, and which the Lord does not fail to acknowledge. He knew their works, their labor and endurance; their abhorrence of evil men; their intelligent and faithful rejection of those who claimed apostolic office or position; but all this would not suffice, if love to Himself were deficient or declining. Note, then, as deeply significant, that at the outset of the church's history, there is discovered, declining love to Christ, the root and starting-point of all failure and sin.

In this lapsed condition, the call is to—(1) "Remember whence thou art fallen," and (2) "Repent, and do the first works." This definite and emphatic call has been remarkably disregarded. At the Reformation there was no recognition of the status from which the church had fallen. There was the revolt of even natural conscience against iniquities of the so-called church; there was recovery of salvation by faith, and of right to the use of the Scriptures; but no serious inquiry as to the original status of the church, or as to scriptural practice in the church. The Lord's Supper in its true simplicity and beauty was not restored. The place and office of the Holy Spirit in meetings and worship were not seen; and instead of the Spirit's power and guidance, a substitute—humanly invented liturgies were continued; and in place of a free exercise of the Holy Spirit's gifts in the body of Christ, a humanly appointed clergy was still permitted. So also in subsequent movements since the Reformation, resulting in the numerous denominations now existing; there has been in some, most blessed evangelizing zeal; in others a rallying for one doctrine or ordinance or another; but not any going back to the point from which the church had departed; no solemn calling to mind whence it had fallen, no studying it out from the Scriptures; and by consequence, no repentance and doing the first works. This is deeply important for the church today—and indeed, for any case of repentance—to go back, and not stop short of the topmost point of departure.

Failing repentance, the lamp will be removed. This is announced at the beginning of the church's departure. The word "quickly" in the fifth verse of the Authorized Version is not authentic; the removal of the lamp is certain, but the judgment may be delayed, and has been long delayed; it is not until Laodicea that the dead profession is spued out of Christ's mouth. Repentance, however, as a matter of fact, not having taken place, the sentence is certain, THE LAMP OF CHRISTIANITY WILL BE REMOVED FROM CHRISTENDOM.

In the Ephesian epistle, two evils are seen as intruding into the church, but not yet allowed. One is the early appearance of clerical assumption, and the Lord commends resistance to the claim: "Thou hast tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found

them liars.” No-where in scripture is there any authority for the continuance of apostles, or any provision for succession to the apostolic, function or office. The office was temporary, to lay doctrinally the foundation of the church, and an apostle must be a witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:22). True ministry, according to Scripture, in the power of the Holy Ghost, is indeed blessed, and is provided for, for the Holy Spirit remains with the church to the end (John 14:16). But office and gift are two distinct things, and there is no authority upon earth now to appoint to an office in the church, either apostle, bishop or elder, or deacon.

The other of the two evils is Nicolaitanism. And what, it may be asked, is Nicolaitanism? An elaborate explanation has been proposed, based solely on a supposed etymology of the word Nicolaitan; Nike- in Greek being victory, and laos, the people. Hence it has been assumed that Nicolaitanism meant an overcoming of the people; and this is taken to be the rise and prevalence of clerical authority. But this derivation, even supposing it to be actual, and not more than a fancy attached to a mere name, would just as well bear the meaning of a victory by the people over some one else, as a victory by some one else over the people. The explanation, however, is based upon a fallacious theory; ‘a name in Scripture,’ it is alleged, ‘is always significant.’ That it is SOMETIMES so, that it may be so, would be within the mark of sober interpretation; but to adopt it as a universal rule, would give a precarious scope to imagination, and certainly tend to unsound exegesis.

That Nicolaitanism can scarcely mean clericalism seems palpable from the fact that clericalism has already been dealt with in plain language in this same epistle (verse 2). And when so treated, the tone used towards each subject is so different as scarcely to permit of their being the same. The rejection of clericalism is very simply and moderately commended, but the utterance about Nicolaitanism is exceedingly strong, and it closes the judgment upon Ephesus: “I will remove thy lamp out of its place except thou repent. BUT THIS THOU HAST THAT THOU HATEST THE WORKS OF THE NICOLAITANS, WHICH I ALSO HATE.” We are not told what the works were. Another has said, “This strong expression in the mouth of our Lord, unquestionably points at deeds of abomination and impurity.” Ephesus, at all events, was faithful as to the solemn evil, whatever it was; they had the mind of Christ about it—there was no apathy; they “hated” the works of the Nicolaitans, and the Lord hated them too. How intense is God's hatred of unholiness! Respecting Nicolaitans, we shall find more in the Epistle to Pergamum. In this epistle, the promise is: “To him that overcomes, I will give to him to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” In the earthly paradise, man never ate of the tree of life, but was, after he had sinned, sent out of the garden to till the ground; and cherubim and a flaming sword kept the way of the tree of life. But what man forfeited, and never tasted in the earthly paradise, is, in the paradise of God, the beatific food of the overcomer (chap. 2:7).

SMYRNA

Persecution, suffering for the faith, is the prominent point in Smyrna, and the title which the Lord takes corresponds to this. “These things, saith the First and the Last, He who became dead and lived.” The Lord thus places Himself before the distressed Smyrneans as one who had passed through the extremity of suffering. He had been through death.

Besides tribulation, they were in poverty, and Omniscience knew it all; but that is not the form in which He conveys His consolation. He shows them that He knows their sorrows in detail. It was not enough for their hearts, or His, to say that He knew them in the gross. As to Israel in bondage (Ex. 7), “I know their sorrows,” so here, it is His heart speaking to their hearts. “I know thy tribulation and thy poverty; but thou art rich; and the railing of those who say that they themselves are Jews, and are not, but a synagogue of Satan. Fear nothing of what thou art about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days. Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life.”

When in tribulation of any sort, it supports the Christian to know that our Lord is acquainted with all the circumstances: He takes cognizance of minor trials far short of death. How gracious of Him to say, “I know the railing of those who say they are Jews, and are not.” In our Bibles this is translated “blasphemy,” which, in English, is commonly understood to be blasphemy against God. This, however, is not the true sense. It is railing by those who claim to be Jews, against those who had gone forth to Christ without the camp. “Jews” in this epistle may be both literal and symbolic. Literal for the actual church of Smyrna, for in apostolic times Jews were bitter haters of the gospel. Symbolically, and in later times, it would represent those nominal Christians who are professedly the church of God, who claim a superior religious status, but who speak evil against those who manifest the life of Christ—and in times past have persecuted them. Contempt and railing are a sore trial to the spirit—hard to bear; and the Lord tells the Smyrneans that He knew of the railing, and lets them know His estimate of their foes they were a “synagogue of Satan.”

There is another comfort here for the soul in trial. It may seem to us that the world, or men of the world, have a victorious course before them — that the power is all in their hands. But here it is shown that the limit of suffering is prescribed: “Ye shall have tribulation ten days.” When faith apprehends this, it can be still, knowing that God is the superior; He is over all. “Be still and know that I am God.” The book of Job lifts the curtain off Satan's doings, and shows that Satan can only go as far as God allows him. “All that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand” (Job 1:12). Later, God saw fit to extend the trial, but never without limit. “Behold he is in thine hand, but save his life” (Job 2:6). Smyrna, however, was honored with a higher martyrdom than Job: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life.” “He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies. He that overcomes shall in nowise be injured of the second death” (ver. 11). This does not imply that any saint, however feeble, would or could become liable to the second death. Its force is simply this—that, being persecuted and about to be cast into prison, they are exhorted to be faithful unto death (verse 10), and the overcomer is reminded for his comfort that, though he may be called upon to give up his life for his faith, that would be the end of his suffering; there was no second death for him, as there would be for the persecutors. The second death is being cast into the lake of fire, consequent upon the judgment of the great white throne (Revelation 20:14; see also Luke 12:5).

Viewing the seven churches as symbolical of the church's career, Smyrna represents the early persecutions. Seduction by worldly temptations follows later. This is usually the way. Satan tries to destroy; this failing, he seeks to draw aside. So in the case of Israel; destruction was attempted through Pharaoh, and afterward by seducing the people in the wilderness. So, too, with the blessed Lord: Satan, through Herod, sought to take His life; afterward came the temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4, Luke 4).

In the Epistle to Ephesus, the Lord says, “I know thy works,” etc. To Smyrna He says, “I know thy tribulation and poverty,” etc., but some meddlesome person has interfered with the text by repeating in Smyrna's epistle “thy works” in the list of things which the Lord says that He knows. The same has been done in the succeeding epistle to Pergamum, but both are without authority.

Smyrna is one of two churches, the other being Philadelphia, with regard to which the Lord has no adverse comment or criticism to make.

[E. J.T.]

(To be continued)

Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos, Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos: Part 2

PERGAMUM 1

In Pergamum, we shall see, keen judgment of evil was called for, and the character which the Lord assumes is consistent with that. "These things says He that has the sharp two-edged sword." But, nevertheless, His gracious way is shown in praising everything He can, before commencing to deal with what was wrong.

"I know where thou dwellest, where the throne of Satan [is]; and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in the days in which Antipas my faithful witness [was], who was slain among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against thee; that thou hast there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a snare before the sons of Israel, to eat [of] idol sacrifices and commit fornication. So thou also hast those who hold the doctrine of Nicolaitanes in like manner. Repent therefore; but if not, I come to thee quickly, and I will make war with them with the sword of my mouth."

There is a change here, and a marked contrast with Smyrna. Smyrna was overwhelmed with tribulation and persecution—and more was yet predicted for her. To Pergamum, instead of "I know thy tribulation," it is, "I know where thou dwellest, where Satan's throne is." The Christian's calling is to be a stranger and a pilgrim, so that "DWELLING" where Satan's throne is, may imply very different relations with the world of which Satan is the prince. Probably the reference is to the time, the fourth century, when, under Constantine, Christianity became the public, accepted religion of the Roman Empire—that is, of the world. True, there had been martyrdom; but this was in the past. The Lord, however, is able to acknowledge—to their honor—that they still held fast His name, and had not denied His faith even in the days when Antipas, His faithful witness, was slain.

An important principle is shown in this epistle; that of assembly-responsibility. This, in some quarters, is not known; in some, not admitted; but Christ says, "Thou hast there those who hold the doctrine of..." And again, "So thou also hast those who hold the doctrine of..." If challenged as to evil doctrine held amongst them, those who would evade assembly-responsibility, generally answer, 'We do not trouble as to what Mr. X holds.' But we cannot deceive Christ; His eyes are as a flame of fire. He knows everything that goes on, and He says: "Thou hast there those who hold the doctrine of..."

The Lord finds against Pergamum that they had there those who held the doctrine of Balaam. Balaam's case illustrates more than one kind of evil. One is, prostituting his prophetic office to the world for gain. In this he was a type of many in these last days—as Jude says of them they have "run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward" (Jude 11). In this aspect, the "doctrine of Balaam" typifies the evil of clericalism—the ministry of Christ turned into a polite and desirable profession, carrying worldly rank and honor. Ephesus had been commended for resisting this in its incipency; but in Pergamum it had developed into a system; there was the "doctrine of Balaam." To what dimensions it has since grown is common knowledge. There are Princes of the Church in Rome, and Lords, Spiritual and Temporal in England, with how many minor degrees of honor and wealth, who shall say? —though, indeed, to many of the clergy but little of the latter reaches. Worse, however, than worldly benefits, is that an official clergy too often cringes to the opinion of the day—superstition, when that is superstition; and rationalism in a day of rationalism. This is at its maturity in our time, when we see the professed ministry of Christ giving itself over to discredit Holy Scripture, and undermine Christianity in its essential doctrines.

God in His love for His people frustrated the designs of Balak against Israel, so far as that Balaam was not allowed to curse the people; and hence, after the failure of various attempts, "Balaam rose up and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way" (Numbers 24:14). But what followed? "The people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and the people did eat and bowed down to their gods" (Numbers 25:1, 2). The narrative does not give details of this latter effort of Balak and Balaam, further than to say that it was "through the counsel of Balaam" (Numbers 31:16); and in one chapter the Lord Himself states that "Balaam taught Balak to set a snare before the sons of Israel, to eat of idol-sacrifices, and to commit fornication" (Revelation 2:14). Now this is the other evil of the teaching of Balaam referred to in the Epistle to Pergamum. What, then, is this teaching? IT IS UNION WITH THE WORLD; giving up the Christian position of separation from the world (Romans 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:14-18, etc.), abandoning that separation, as no longer to be maintained; joining in closest union with the world, and bowing down to the idols that the world bows down to. This is the antitype of eating things sacrificed to idols, and committing fornication, with the daughters of Moab. And this received the sanction and encouragement of teaching in Pergamum.

There was another evil in Pergamum: "So thou also hast those who hold the doctrine of Nicolaitans in like manner." Ephesus has been commended for hating the DEEDS of the Nicolaitans. But this is an advance in evil. The "deeds" were followed by doctrine which justified the deeds, and deliberately taught things which Christ hated. Satan felt his way warily with Ephesus; but at Pergamum the evil is admitted and taught. There is nothing to show that the Nicolaitans were a sect, separating from the flock. At first, in the Ephesian stage, they simply adopted vile practices; while later, in Pergamum, they taught their views, and were tolerated in so doing; but still not a sect. The Lord holds the assembly responsible for having them there, so that they were not separated as a sect, nor had the assembly put them away as evil persons. The Lord's language is extremely strong, both in approval of the Ephesians, and in condemnation of the evil doers.

The silence of scripture as to what Nicolaitanism was, is significant; possibly it is left so, that we may be able to fill in the blank with other evil doctrines which may arise, and which may be tolerated by an assembly. That the Lord holds the entire assembly responsible for what it allows in its midst is clear, whether deeds or doctrine. In the extended view of the seven churches, it is not difficult to surmise what

Nicolaitanism probably typifies; that it is not clericalism is evident; for clericalism is dealt with under two other heads, as has been shown; neither is it licentious mingling with the world, for that is the doctrine of Balaam. But there is another evil that has blotted Christianity, enormous in dimensions, but the nature of which explains the reticence of Scripture about it. In the early centuries, asceticism infected the church; this developed into attaching a special virtue to celibacy. Instead of holiness being the result, in the end of the second century and subsequently, unnamable corruption was the fruit of it; that corruption has continued since, and survives today. How well this suits the language of our Lord to Ephesus: "But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate" (Revelation 2:6). The doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, both tended to fleshly indulgence, but in totally different ways; one was in mingling with the world; but the other was a deeper form of corruption, licensed and allowed within the circle of the so-called church. Especially appropriate to this condition is Christ's character in the epistle: "He that hath the sharp sword with two edges." "For the word of God is living and operative, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, both of joints and marrow, and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is not a creature unapparent before him; but all things are naked and laid bare to his eyes, with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:12, 13, New Translation). Following comes a solemn call to REPENT, addressed to that which represents the assembly. Not merely the evil-doers are held responsible, but the whole assembly—for the assembly is defiled by evil which it tolerates in its midst. Failing repentance, Christ threatens the evil-doers that He will come quickly, and fight against them with the sword of His mouth. This does not mean Christ's second coming—but that He would be turned into an adversary to the sinners. In the state of things such as at Pergamum, the word ministered by His faithful servants in the assembly would be as a sharp sword with two edges; normally, Christ's word to the saints is cheering, comforting, teaching, encouraging; but where evil exists, it is stern and sharp, and would be exceedingly uncomfortable, except to those who have a good conscience. If the word in the assembly be still resisted, Christ, Who is in the midst of the golden lamps (chap. 1.), will act in judgment in His solemn character as revealed in that vision—and this may be even to death (1 Cor. 11:29-32).

The promises to the overcomer are especially sweet and encouraging. They are two-

1. To PARTAKE OF THE HIDDEN MANNA. The manna in the wilderness was a type of Christ in His life as man down here, and a golden pot of it was placed in the ark of the covenant for a memorial (Ex. 16:33, 34; Hebrews 9:4); it was hidden there. Of this mystical store we shall partake in heaven. In the glory we shall have blessed communion with Jesus, in respect of His path of humiliation in this world. The angels cannot have, with Him, that mutual sympathy respecting the trials of the godly here, which we shall be privileged to enjoy.

But not only in heaven; even here, the spiritual, the faithful, they who overcome while corruption spreads around, are given to partake of this secret delight.

2. "And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written, which no one knows but he that receives [it]." The word used here () signifies a stone or pebble which, in ancient times, had two well-known uses. In criminal cases, a white stone was given denoting acquittal; or a black, signifying condemnation. Thus Paul, referring to his pre-converted days when he persecuted the Christians, says, that when they were put to death, he gave his voice against them—literally, it is, he gave his stone against them; the word is the same (Acts 26:10). But there was another signification; the white stone meant a token given to victors in the public games. Either of these two senses would suit the present case, though probably it is the latter which is intended for the overcomer in the Revelation. The white stone of our chapter, however, had a rare and precious attribute; it contained, and conferred on the possessor, a name which no one knew but he that received it. How sweet, amid the thronging myriads in heaven, for an individual to enjoy a secret shared only by himself I and the Lord of glory! Personality and private acquaintance with the Lord Jesus will not be lost in the numerousness of the glorified hosts. How compensative will this be for any toil or loss or adversity into which, down here, faithfulness may have led the overcomer!

E.J.T.

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