

"FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH"

– *DECEMBER 10. – REVELATION 2:1-17. –*

THE REVELATION A BOOK OF SYMBOLS – SEVEN SUCCESSIVE STAGES IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH SYMBOLIZED BY "THE SEVEN CHURCHES WHICH ARE IN ASIA" – THE NAMES OF THE CHURCHES CHARACTERISTIC – THE GREAT FALLING AWAY – THE TRUE CHURCH CALLED "OVERCOMERS" – THE LORD'S RETURN DURING THE LAODICEAN PERIOD OF CHURCH HISTORY.

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the Crown of Life." – Verse 10.

WHILE the messages given to the seven churches specified in the Revelation were doubtless applicable to them, they properly have a still wider application to the entire Gospel Church, the number seven representing completeness. The Book of Revelation is a book of symbols, which our Lord "sent and signified [told it in signs and symbols] by His angel unto His servant John." (Revelation 1:1.) Bible students know that the book abounds in symbols, or signs; and we are satisfied that these are the rule, and that the literal is the exception, being used only when unavoidable.

To be in harmony, then, with the rest of the book, "the seven churches which are in Asia" must be symbolic; and as the book is chiefly history written beforehand, they must symbolize seven successive stages in the history of the Christian Church, covering the period between the First Advent and the Second Coming of Christ. The fulfilment, we think, proves the correctness of this position.

In the first chapter we have a description of "One like unto a son of man," as seen in vision by the Apostle John. Some one or

more of the features of this description would seem to be peculiarly appropriate to each of the successive stages of the Church; and in each case He who sends the message is thus described. The last part of each message is a promise to the "overcomers," and is also adapted to the different periods of Church history.

To give a bird's-eye view of the arrangement, we would notice their chronological position. Ephesus covers the period during the lives of the Apostles; Smyrna, the time of the Pagan persecution, reaching to about 325 A.D., when Constantine became Emperor of Rome and declared in favor of Christianity. Pergamos embraces the transition period during which the Papacy had its rise; Thyatira, the space during which the true Church was in the wilderness, and the Apostate Church sat as a queen and lived deliciously with the kings of the earth. Sardis includes a short interval just before the Reformation; Philadelphia, the period from the Reformation until recent times; and Laodicea, the nominal Church of today.

MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS

The word Ephesus means first, desirable. During this period our Lord "holdeth the seven stars in His right hand," etc. (Chapter 1:20.) The messengers of the Churches – St. Paul, St. Peter, St. John, etc. – were so powerfully led and kept in the grasp of our Lord Jesus during this epoch that we accept their teachings as His, believing that their words were really His words. This stage of the Church is commended for its faithful, patient labor and for its discernment of Truth and true teachers. – Acts 20:28-30; 1 Cor. 11:19.

It was characteristic of this period that "they forsook all and followed Him." They took joyfully the spoiling of their goods. They sold what they had and gave to those in want. Though often deprived of the bread of this present life, they not only had the Living Bread, but had the promise of "the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." It will be remembered that all the trees in Eden were trees of life, but that the one in the midst of the Garden was

then a forbidden tree, the disobedient eating of which brought death upon Adam and all his race. That tree in the midst of Paradise was called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"; and our Lord's promise in today's Study is that the overcomers of the Gospel Age shall have full liberty to partake of that tree under most blessed and satisfactory conditions, when the knowledge will be of benefit to them under Divine approval, and will not then bring a curse.

TO THE CHURCH OF SMYRNA

Smyrna means bitter. Myrrh and Marah are kindred words. This stage of the Christian Church was the period of most bitter persecution, under the Roman Emperors from Nero to Diocletian. In His message to the Church of this epoch our Lord styles Himself "the First and the Last, which was dead and is alive." In no other sense or way could He be the First and the Last than as the only direct creation of the Father, through whom all else was created. Any other view would be in conflict with the Scriptures. – Revelation 3:14; Colossians 1:15; 1 Corinthians 8:6; John 1:1-3, Diaglott.

"The Devil shall cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried, and ye shall have tribulation ten days." Thus the Lord informed His faithful servants of this period that theirs would be a time of great persecution. Pagan Rome, here symbolized as the Devil, has been the most devilish of all earthly governments, when viewed in the light of its bloody persecutions. The ten symbolic days refer to the last and most severe persecution under the Roman Emperors – that of the reign of Diocletian, A.D. 303-313. Those who have read the history of this period can understand the depths of the words, "that ye may be tried." Some of the most sublime pictures of Christian endurance that the world has ever seen were enacted during the Smyrna period of the Church. The call was for faithfulness unto death; the promise was that the overcomers should "not be hurt of the Second Death," but should receive the Crown of Life – immortality.

TO THE CHURCH OF PERGAMOS

Pergamos means an earthly elevation. The Speaker is "He who hath the sharp Sword with two edges" [Greek, two-mouthed] – the Word of God. During this period, while the nominal Church was growing popular, the true Christians were tested and proved by the introduction and development of Pagan and Papal ideas. The Pagan [R5993 : page 346] priests, unwilling to lose their positions of honor and influence amongst the people, sought to bend their ideas to fit the new religion. Thus while nominally professing Christianity, they brought many of their former ideas with them into the Christian Church. These were eventually grafted upon the true stock – "the faith once delivered to the saints." – Jude 3.

Thus gradually the Church was led into error, evil practises, and away from God. This is what is meant in Verse 14 by the allusion to Balaam and Balak. It will be remembered that Balaam, who had been a prophet of God, instructed King Balak how to tempt Israel to sin, and thus brought about what he could not accomplish by his own powers. (Numbers 23; 24; 31:16.) So these Pagan priests taught the Church to indulge in spiritual fornication, and thus brought upon her the withering blight of the wrath of God.

The "doctrine of the Nicolaitans" seems to be the theory of lordship or headship in the Church. The strife as to who should be greatest existed amongst many of the patriarchs – fathers – of the prominent churches. At their councils there was a bitter fight for supremacy. The [R5993 : page 347] tendency was toward an earthly head, and of course many coveted the honor. The patriarchs of Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome were the most prominent. The first two dropped out of the conflict, but the strife continued for several hundred years between Constantinople and Rome. It was settled only by a division of the Church: the Eastern, or Greek Church, accepting the Patriarch of Constantinople for its

head; and the Western, or Papal Church, acknowledging the Bishop – Pope or Father – of Rome.

Many of the true followers of the Master in the churches denounced this attempt to disobey the direct command of Jesus, "Call no man father." (Matthew 23:9.) Of course, they received the promised persecution. (2 Timothy 1:12.) This class in Pergamos is commended by our Lord under the symbol of "Anti-pas, My faithful martyr." In the Greek, *anti* means against, and *Papas* signifies father. In this stage of the development of the Church those who sought to be popular received the emoluments of the Church; but the promise to the overcomers is that of pleasure and honor that shall be eternal.

THE CHURCH OF THYATIRA

Thyatira seems to mean "the sweet perfume of sacrifice." It was the period of Papal persecution. The virgin Church was enduring the hardships of the wilderness; while the apostate Church sat on the throne of her royal paramour. The message is sent by Him "who hath eyes like a flame of fire," to watch over His faithful ones as they wandered through the dark valleys or hid in the darker caves of earth; and "feet of hard brass," to walk by their side as they scaled the rugged mountains or wandered footsore and weary, seeking a place to plant the seeds of Truth.

The message contains an allusion to a faithful old Prophet who fled for his life into the wilderness from the wrath of the idolatrous wife of a king. The picture is from the history of the Prophet Elijah. (1 Kings 18; 19.) Jezebel was the protector of the priests of Baal. Her husband was king, and she wielded his power for her own ends. The drouth of three and one-half years was evidently a type of the "time, times and a half" – 1260 years – of the spiritual famine, "not of bread nor of water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." – Amos 8:11.

THE LORD'S SECOND COMING

Sardis is said to mean that which remains, as if it signified a useless remnant, something out of which life or virtue had gone. The nominal Church during this period had the appearance of being what it was not, having a form of godliness without its power. Sardis was the remains of the true Church, which had been driven into the wilderness; but when the persecution began to subside, her zeal also abated. Persecution has always developed the vigor of the Church.

Many today have the Sardis characteristics. To such there is a fatal warning in Revelation 3:3. Seven times our Lord's Second Coming is described as being thief-like, stealthy. Only to those who are watching is the approach of a thief known. Those who are asleep will be awakened only after he has taken full possession, after his work of destruction has progressed. Although they may then arouse themselves, it is too late. They have been overtaken. Thus our Lord will be present, but invisible and unknown – except to the watchers – for some years after His arrival; and His presence will be recognized by the sleepers only as the noise of spoiling the Strong Man's House gradually increases. Then slowly will they realize what it is and what the outcome will be.

The reason why many professing Christians cannot recognize our Lord's Parousia – presence – is that they are looking for a fleshly Christ, visible to the fleshly eye, and making an imposing demonstration which they cannot mistake. Failing to realize the fact that spiritual bodies cannot be seen by human eyes without a miracle, they cannot understand how He can be present while "all things continue as they were since the beginning of creation." (2 Peter 3:3,4.) Thus they are unable to understand "the signs of the times," revealing His return.

THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia means brotherly love, as is well known. This stage of the Church's history evidently began at the Reformation; and there are many still living who possess the characteristics described.

There is considerable similarity between the work begun on Pentecost and that of Luther and his friends. The Reformation was, in a sense, the beginning of a new era, a dawning of light where all had been darkness, the separation of the true from the false, and a new start in the way of Truth. No doubt all the powers of Satan were exerted to close the door then opened; but "He that is true" had said, "which no man can shut." Compared with the mighty hosts of their enemies, the little band of Reformers had but "a little strength"; but they knew that they had the Truth, and they fully trusted the Giver. Thus the Master could say, "Thou hast kept My Word, and hast not denied My name."

During the Philadelphian period, especially during the first and the last phases of it, the faithful have either been obliged to come out of the nominal temple or have been cast out for their straight testimony. The reward promised them is that they will be, not simply an unimportant part, but a vital one – a pillar in the true and eternal Temple – a part which cannot be removed while the structure exists. During their trial state their names were cast out as evil. They were branded as infidels and heretics. They were not recognized as children of God, as citizens of the Heavenly Country, as Christians. All this is to be reversed. "The Lord knoweth them that are His," and in due time will fully and eternally acknowledge them.

THE NOMINAL CHURCH OF TODAY

Laodicea is interpreted to mean a tried, or judged people. The description shows us that they were tried and found wanting. If we understand Christ's meaning in this message, it is sent particularly to those who profess His name, but deny the Truth which He

Himself here presents. Let those who read this special message do so with special care.

"The Beginning of the creation of God." "What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He?" (Matthew 22:42.) This question has had many answers. More Bible and less hymn-book theology would have made the subject clearer to all. The doctrine of the trinity is totally opposed to Scripture, and has not even one reasonable text to support it when the well-known interpolation of 1 John 5:7 is discarded and when John 1:1 is properly understood. We suggest that any reader who does not see this subject clearly should read carefully and prayerfully the 17th chapter of St. John's Gospel.

The Message to the Laodicean stage of the Church pictures the nominal Church of today as our Lord sees her. In one sense she is not cold. She has much zeal, but not according to knowledge. She has organized her armies, developed her machinery and multiplied her stores; but yet the enemy does not fall before her. She claims that her principal object is to convert sinners, to bring forth spiritual children. The Prophet puts these words into the mouth of nominal Christians when they **[R5993 : page 348]** awake to a knowledge of the situation: "We have been with child, we have been in pain, we have as it were brought forth wind; we have not wrought any deliverance in the earth; neither have the inhabitants of the earth fallen." (Isaiah 26:16-18.) This is said after they have realized the presence of the Lord.

We should not look for light where little remains but the fading reflections of a former glory. The sickly hue which now appears is only the smoke illuminated by the piercing rays from the Hand which, high upon the wall, is writing, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN." (Daniel 5:25-28.) Unknown to the Laodicean Church, our Lord has returned. He has stood at the door and knocked. Had they been awake, they would have heard. Our Lord clearly foretold that He would come as a thief; but He did not tell at what hour.

While the nominal church is still seemingly in power, while the old glory still hangs about her, while it is still respectable and honorable to be a church member, the Little Flock of Truth-seekers are despised and rejected. They are covered with reproach because they dare to point out the faults of a worldly church. They are looked down upon by her who sits as a proud queen, lifted up in order that she may have the greater fall. – Revelation 18:7,21.

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