

THE LORD OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

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Foreword

This booklet is a meditative journey to the seven churches of Asia Minor located in present-day western Turkey. It is written prior to undertaking the journey to the historical locations with the aim of spiritually preparing the travelers. Pilgrims who have invested time in educating themselves are better positioned to understand, appreciate and apply spiritual insights from such excursions. We are immensely grateful to the Lord Jesus Christ for giving us such an opportunity. While mass travel and tourism is a common undertaking in this era of convenient and comfortable travel, the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us of how easily the world can grind to a halt.

Our own church in Norway had become used to travelling to conferences in Europe every two months in the last few years, but the pandemic had confined us to our homes since March 2020. As of writing these words (April 2021), we plan this trip based on faith and renewed appreciation of the words of a humble servant of the Lord, James, whose words are as relevant today as they were two millennia ago.

James 4:13 *Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:*

James 4:14 *Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.*

James 4:15 *For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.*

James 1:17 *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

Patmos

Rev 1:9 *I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

The apostle John, called the “beloved apostle”, was banished to the island of Patmos to silence him from being a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. We remember how the apostle Peter was also put in prison and awaited execution to silence the leader of the church. Satan always targets the leaders to fulfill the scripture that says, “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones” (Zechariah 13:7).



When the servants of God are silenced, the heavens make a loud noise. Paul and Silas were released from prison because God sent a mighty earthquake. Now, in the island of Patmos (image left), John received the powerful revelations that he was told to write in a book. It was the Lord’s way of giving John some solitude so he could see, hear and write about these end time events. Persecution for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will never lead to a silencing of a Christian – something more powerful will transpire.

Furthermore, the Book of Revelation first addressed the current needs of the churches of the Lord before it went on to address the issues of the future. It was not just a book about prophetic events still ahead of us in 2021, but messages for the saints and churches of the time of John. Before God is concerned for our

present spiritual welfare, and he wants us to do the best we can and edify us. He is not into sensationalism and drama for the sake of it.

Revelation 1:12 *And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;*

Let us always keep in mind that the Lord Jesus said he is Alpha and Omega from the midst of the seven churches represented by the seven-branched golden lampstand. God is always found within and in his beloved church. The revelation that Jesus is God almighty thunders from within the church. A church that does not preach and declare this greatest of all truths does not have Jesus inside. John turned to see the voice – may the world turn to see the voice in the church that declares Jesus is Alpha and Omega. We always find the great declarations of who Jesus is from different churches in the New Testament. For example Paul tells the Colossians, “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9).

Consider the two letters by which Jesus described himself – Alpha and Omega (image on the right). There is nothing before “Alpha” and there is nothing after “Omega”. There is nothing and nobody before and after the Lord Jesus Christ. “ And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18). Not only that, but Alpha and



Omega means that Jesus is everything in between Alpha and Omega. Jesus wanted John to know that although he may have lost his freedom, space, proper food, care, love, etc. in Patmos, Jesus is still sufficient for him. “But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). How lonely John must have felt at Patmos and, yet, in the midst of the crushing loneliness, Jesus appears, blesses him and takes him in the spirit to visit the throne of heaven. The others who may have seen John sitting alone, had no idea that he was fellowshiping with mighty angels, 24 elders and, above all, the Lord Jesus himself. A Christian

does not need to be alone or lonely; all we need to do is call upon the name of the Lord and he will be our Alpha and Omega.

Revelation 1:13 *And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.*



Jesus wore a golden girdle. In the image above one can see the high priest of Israel's golden girdle. Only the high priest was permitted to wear one. "And these are the garments which they shall make; a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a brodered coat, a mitre, and a girdle: and they shall make holy garments for Aaron thy brother, and his sons, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office" (Exodus 28:4). A girdle on the priest reminded him of his attachment to the people of God. Jesus binds us to him around his waist and loins like the golden girdle. Levi means "attached". The Levites were attached to God and

now Jesus shows us his attachment to us through the golden girdle at Patmos. Jesus is officially the high priest of the church in the order of Melchizedek.

Psalm 110:4 *The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.*

Heb 7:24 *But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.*

Heb 7:25 *Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.*

Heb 7:26 *For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.*

There are further details in the appearance of the Lord at Patmos that give expression to his ministry. “His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire” (Revelation 1:14). It is significant that Jesus had white hair as wool. This was the same vision that the prophet Daniel had received. “I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire” (Daniel 7:9). Jesus is the ancient of days – he is above time. This why the Lord follows this vision up with these words to John, “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death” (Revelation 1:18). Time does all sorts of things to us – but not to Jesus! There is this reassuring promise that Jesus will shield us from the power of time to break down and scatter. Jesus has overcome time and so will we through faith in him. The fire in his eyes denotes his power to burn through every lie and evil with his gaze. Nothing is hid from him. His feet of brass signify his triumph over all adversities. He has walked all over sin, sickness, trials and even death and conquered. His feet have been tried in the fiery furnace. The seven stars are the seven shepherds who watch over the sheep which Jesus holds in his right hand so no one can pluck them out of his hand – “And he had in his right hand seven stars” (Rev 1:16). Finally, the seven lampstands are his beloved churches. Jesus both holds them in his right hand (Rev 1:20) and is in their midst at the same time (Rev 1:13). How beautiful is that! Hallelujah!

The Church of Ephesus

Revelation 2:1 *Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.*

The city of Ephesus (Efes in Turkish) is located about 80 kilometers/one hour drive southeast of the city of Izmir (biblical Smyrna). It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. One of this Greek city's claim to

Model of Temple of Artemis at Istanbul, Turkey



fame was the Temple of Artemis (Diana in Latin) which existed between 550 BC and 401 AD. In Babylon, Artemis was known as Ishtar, from which the name Ester is derived. The Temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The upper body of Diana was covered with breasts to give expression to her deity as the goddess of fertility and life. A chief priest who was a eunuch and entitled Megabyzos led the cult and worship of Diana together with many eunuchs and virgins. Like other ancient cities, Ephesus had a temple dedicated to prostitutes where adherents fornicated with the prostitutes as part of the worship. Reports

suggest that part of the worship ritual to Diana involved orgies in which some men cut off their genitals and offered them to Diana after which they entered the priesthood. Like nature, Diana's life force was supposed to permeate every inch of existence. In particular, women who struggled to become pregnant offered sacrifices to Diana. Figures of Artemis were sold everywhere and the artisans became very wealthy, which is why the entire city was furious when sales of Diana's figures declined because of one very effective evangelist – the Apostle Paul.

Act 19:24 *For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen.*

Act 19:27 *So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth.*

Act 19:28 *And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.*

Statue of Artemis, Diana of Ephesus

Make no mistake – the enemy becomes very dangerous when his business is threatened. Demetrius and his



fellow craftsmen were more concerned for their wealth rather than truth and salvation. There is no disease that blinds so completely as the love for money!

“For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (I Timothy 6:10). Rational and modern individuals of our day may laugh at the superstition of the Ephesians, who worshipped a goddess covered in female breasts (see image on the left), but we must see past the visible into the invisible realm. It is abundantly clear that the city of Ephesus

was a stronghold of demonic forces. We cannot fully appreciate the immense challenge the dominant Ephesian culture had on the Christians of Ephesus. This is why the Apostle Paul told the Ephesians:

Ephesians 6:11 *Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.*

Ephesians 6:12 *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*

Ephesians 6:13 *Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.*

Ephesus teaches us that the forces of darkness are not content with just a temple or a few soothsayers. It was a totalitarian project – the Devil was successful in projecting his authority and influence in almost every sphere of daily life: economic, social and political. We must understand that we are living in the days the Apostle Paul called the era of the “falling away” which may have an immaterial beginning, but will gradually snowball into a time when, not just one or few cities, but the entire world will look like Ephesus. Let us not

forget – it was the determined efforts of Apostles such as Paul and Barnabas (founders) and John (later Bishop) that overthrew the depraved culture of ancient Ephesus. Divination, channeling spirits, tarot cards and other forms of contact with the occult, ultimately leads to the rise of some god-like figure who leads people into destruction.

2Thessalonians 2:3 *Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;*

2Thessalonians 2:4 *Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.*

2Thessalonians 2:9 *Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,*

Where darkness is very oppressive, the light of the Lord Jesus shines even brighter! It is significant that the Lord played on the number seven given that the Temple of Diana was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It must have lifted the spirits of the Christians of Ephesus that the Lord himself walked in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, which represented the seven churches, not the pagan seven wonders. Satan has always worked hard to focus human attention on false religion through the construction of majestic buildings and statues. Why was Nebuchadnezzar incensed with Daniel's friends? Was it not because the demon in him could not bear the fact that they were not impressed with his mighty statue that towered over Babylon? Neither did they fear his fiery furnace that was heated seven times more. In the same vein, the Temple of Diana may have been one of the seven wonders of the ancient world but the Lord wanted them to know that there is no glory or splendor like that of the God of the seven churches and seven angels. The Lord Jesus Christ commanded John to write down what he saw. Why? So that the awesome sight of the Lord clothed in indescribable power would totally eclipse Satan's efforts to dazzle their minds with edifices and statues in Ephesus. We can only imagine the many "Hallelujahs and Amens" that shot up to heaven when the persecuted disciples read the description of what John saw.

Revelation 1:12 *And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;*

Revelation 1:13 *And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.*

Revelation 1:14 *His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire;*

Revelation 1:15 *And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters.*

Revelation 1:16 *And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.*

The Apostle Paul planted the church in Ephesus during his first missionary journey in 52 AD. Clearly, it was Paul who bore the brunt of the hard work and opprobrium of the Ephesians. Later, he called the elders of the church of Ephesus and pleaded with them to take care of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17). Paul was concerned because he was aware that “wolves” would arise from among the elders to trouble the saints. This tells us something about the Devil’s determination to fight the little church planted in the midst of his kingdom in Ephesus. Nevertheless, Paul reminds them that it cost God himself his blood to redeem this church. Hence, they ought to tread very carefully. “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Some years later, in around 64 AD, the Apostle John, together with Mary the mother of the Lord, came to settle down in Ephesus as its Bishop after Paul was martyred in Rome in the same year.

Theater at Ephesus



To the left is the ruins of the theater of Ephesus. This theater could hold about 25,000 people. It was here that the Ephesians, enraged due to the loss of their statue-making business, whipped the public into a frenzy.

Act 19:28 *And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.*

Act 19:29 *And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre.*

The Ephesians also built a colossal statue to the Roman Emperor Domitian (reigned from 81-96 AD) which stood over 8 meters tall upon a colonnaded temple over 10 meters tall. Upon the columns were etched the

Remains of the statue of Domitian



images of every known god in the ancient world. The message was clear: by supporting the platform upon which the colossal statue of Domitian stood, the emperor wanted the world to know he was above all the gods. The statue towered over the city and was visible to all its inhabitants. Obviously, this statue was a source of much worry for the Christians of Ephesus. Domitian took the title “Dominus deus”, which meant “The Lord God” and insisted that any individual entering the Agora (market place) offered incense to his statue. This was an effective method of identifying Christians and other non-conformists to the cult of emperor worship – Christians who refused knew they could pay with their lives.

Previously, it was mentioned that the Apostle John and Mary settled in Ephesus. Among others, the church father, Irenaeus, states that John and Mary are buried in Ephesus. The Lord had entrusted Mary into the care of John. “Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home” (John 19:27). In the 6th century AD,

the Roman emperor Justinian built a basilica where it was believed John was buried. The ruins are still visible today on the slopes of Ayasuluk Hill under the fortress close to Selçuk center, İzmir Province, about 3.5 km from Ephesus. See how the Lord honored his beloved Apostle whom he first met on the shores of the Sea of Galilee! The very same empire which hated Christians and labored diligently to wipe them out, now sought to honor and preserve their blessed memories.



Tomb of the Apostle John



Tree of Life. Ancient Mesopotamia. 1000 BC.

The Lord spoke to the Ephesian Christians using examples familiar to them. The Temple of Diana was built upon a site sacred to the Ephesians because the “tree of life” grew in the same place. This was a date palm tree considered a place of refuge and “salvation” for the Ephesians. Coins were minted in the city depicting this “tree of life” promising life and salvation. The Lord drew upon this context when he made the following promise.

Revelation 2:7 *He that bath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.*

Clearly, the Devil continued to perpetrate his great lie that humans can become like God, thousands of years later in Ephesus. A tree cannot bestow salvation; only the Lord Jesus can! A tree has no healing power of its own; only the Lord can deposit his healing power into a tree. Access to the tree was banned in Genesis, but Satan deceived the Ephesians into believing that he had the power to grant access to this tree – in their own city.

Ephesus was associated with the likes of Paul, Barnabas, Apollos and John. Obviously, the enemy wanted to exploit this and plant false apostles to take over the church and destroy it. Thankfully, the Ephesian Christians were a discerning lot. The Lord applauded them for exposing false apostles. “I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars” (Revelation 2:2). Sadly, however, despite the many virtues of this church, its one major flaw came to overshadow its many other strengths: it had left its first love, Jesus. I say “sadly” because Christians ever since associate the church of Ephesus with this one sin. Before we are tempted to conclude this is unfair, let us examine the issue.

Revelation 2:4 *Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.*

Note carefully that they did not abandon their first love, but “left” it. There is a subtle distinction here. Had they no longer loved Jesus, as some Christians believe, they would not have labored for the Lord and fought against the evil that was ubiquitous in Ephesus. Rather, they were so immersed and consumed by these battles that they took no time out for the great command, “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30). A soldier who is engaged in a life and death struggle with a powerful opponent does this for love of country and family, not the battle for its own sake. Ultimately, the underlying fear concerning contemporary artificial intelligence is the fact that robots can never be programmed to love their human creators; they serve us because we have programmed them to do so. What happens when the programming malfunctions? Picture the dread scenario if they can program themselves to be independent. Analyzed in this manner, it is clear that the Ephesian Christians were in grave danger: they were running on “autopilot” – they were becoming routinized and institutionalized. God’s goodness is evident for all to witness in that he never accepts service without heartfelt love issuing from free human agents.

In summary, The Lord’s Letter to the Ephesians is instructive for us contemporary Christians in several ways. The Ephesian Christians show us that a victorious life of faith is possible despite living in a city inundated with forces hostile to Christianity – the Temple of Diana, the business of Demetrius and the statue of Domitian, to name a few. We have seen that only the ruins of these structures remain in museums while the church of the living Christ still marches on. “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Furthermore, we have learned that the Ephesian Christians, while laboring hard for the Lord and exposing false apostles, neglected the command to love the Lord with all our faculties. Today, we are the church of Ephesus, as we stand in the ruins of this city. Let us pray and resolve to never allow our love for our beloved Lord Jesus Christ to suffer! We will repent and trust that our pilgrimage to this place will serve as testimony that we truly and genuinely love our God and dear Savior, Jesus Christ.

The church of Smyrna

Revelation 2:8 *And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive;*

Revelation 2:9 *I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.*

The modern city of Izmir today has a population of almost 3 million and is the third largest city in Turkey after Istanbul and Ankara. The province of Izmir, has a population of over 4 million and encompasses the ancient cities of Ephesus, Pergamon, Sardis and Klazomenai. Izmir is located in a deep gulf in the Aegean Sea which was ideal for sea trade making the city enormously rich. In the sixth century BC, the Lydians, another Anatolian people who lived in Sardis, burned and destroyed Smyrna. The Persian emperor Cyrus, famous in the Bible in the Book of Daniel, also attacked and dealt Smyrna a powerful blow so that by 545 BC the old city of Smyrna was no more. Around 340 BC, Alexander defeated the Persians and rebuilt the city of Smyrna where the new city stands today. Hence, Smyrna was known as the city which was dead but resurrected anew. This historical wonder was what the Lord played upon when he reminded his church in this city, “These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive” (Revelation 2:8).

Modern city of Izmir



The sight of the city today (picture on the left) should fill our hearts with joy. The resurrection and flourishing of Smyrna ought to remind us of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Like the Lord, his church will always be resurrected and flourish. In fact, of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation, only Smyrna remains today.

Sadly, Smyrna, like Ephesus, was also a city dedicated to false gods. In 195 BC, Smyrna invented a goddess called Roma to deify the city of Rome. In other words, Smyrna declared the city of Rome a divine city and was the first to worship the Capital of the Roman Empire to flatter and endear herself to the mighty

Romans. Rome was the city which oppressed the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition, Smyrna had a temple dedicated to the emperor Tiberius who reigned during the earthly ministry of our Lord and for whom the city of Tibierias in the Galilee was named. This is one reason Christians all the way to our days have believed the city of Rome is the Great Whore of the Book of Revelation. “And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 17:18). We can only imagine the fear and frustration for the Christians living in Smyrna to hear that Rome was to be worshipped as a goddess! Thank God our modern cities have not yet been deified, but we never know what can happen in the future. Let us enjoy and capitalize on the freedom we have to worship the Lord Jesus Christ before religious freedom begins a scarce good.

The name Smyrna, according to some sources, comes from the word “myrrh”. Myrrh comes from a root word meaning bitter in Arabic and Hebrew. We remember Naomi’s bitterness, “And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20). Smyrna was given the sole rights in the Roman world to trade in myrrh and became world famous for this. The myrrh tree is first wounded several times and left to coagulate into resin before it is harvested. The harvesting of myrrh resonates very well with the persecution of the church of Smyrna. Smyrna is known as the persecuted church; they were severely wounded, like the myrrh that made their city famous. Most of all, myrrh will forever be associated with the death and burial of the Lord Jesus. Myrrh is mentioned in the beginning and end of the Lord’s earthly ministry which is perhaps another reason he picked on the theme of “first and last; dead and is alive”. Some scholars believe the myrrh used to embalm the Lord’s body came from Smyrna, as it had a monopoly on the trade in the Roman Empire.



Myrrh resin

Matthew 2:11 *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*

John 19:39 *And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.*



Revelation 2:10 *Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall 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 a crown of life.*

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states: “It seems that the Jews of Smyrna were more antagonistic than were the Romans to the spread of Christianity, for it is said that even on Saturday, their sacred day, they brought wood for the fire in which Polycarp was burned.” God has not called us to anti-Semitism, which, regrettably,

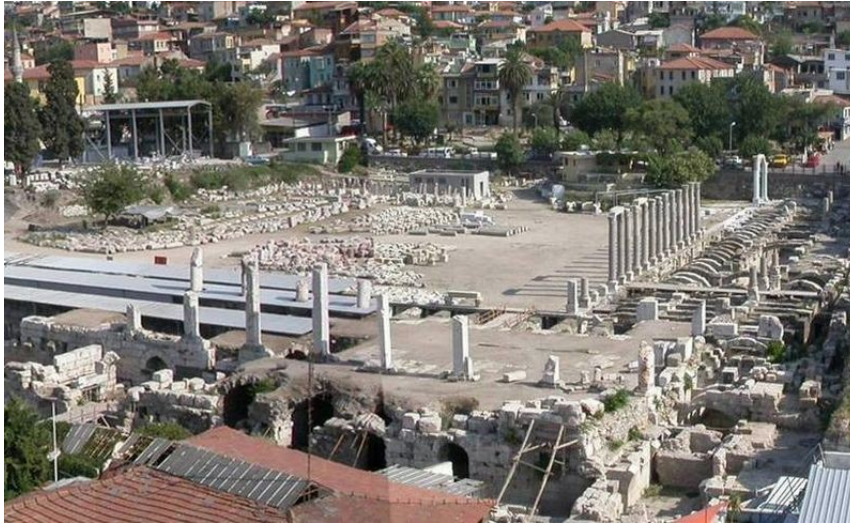
many in the Christian church have been guilty of in the last 2000 years. These “Jews” were not Jews, according to the Lord, who wrote to Smyrna, “and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9).

Who is Polycarp (69-155 AD)? The life of this noteworthy giant of the Christian faith, and Bishop of the church of Smyrna, is worth further exploration. The Apostles won Polycarp to the Lord. He was known as a disciple of the Apostle John and lived in the city of Smyrna. After the death of John, Polycarp (Smyrna), Ignatius (Rome) and Clement (Rome) were considered the leaders of the church worldwide. A Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians (108-140 AD) is attributed to Polycarp, but there is some controversy concerning a statement about whether Ignatius was dead or alive, and so it was not included in the Canon of the New Testament. However, the exhortation in the Letter is very similar to the Epistles of the Apostles in the New Testament. Three times he denounces the love of money. This is significant because it confirms what the Lord wrote to the church of Smyrna in Revelation. “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9). Often, one can gauge the character of a church by studying its leader. Unlike the church of

Laodicea, the church of Smyrna was taught not to love money or strive to be rich. This is all the more remarkable given the enormous wealth in the city of Smyrna.

The great persecution the Lord spoke about affected many Christians, the martyrdom of Polycarp is well documented. It is said that Polycarp dreamed his pillow was on fire the night before he was arrested and interpreted this to signal his own impending martyrdom. According to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written after the death of Polycarp by the Christians of Smyrna, Polycarp refused to hide or escape when he was informed that Roman soldiers were looking to arrest him. The soldiers were quite surprised and confused to meet a very old man, full of courage, compassion and love resting in his house. After serving food to his captors, he asked for and was granted an hour of prayer. He ended up praying passionately for two hours so much so that the soldiers regretted they came to arrest such a noble man. Finally, when he was brought before the chief of police, aptly named Herod, he was told, “What harm is there in saying ‘Lord Caesar,’ and offering sacrifice, and saving yourself from death?” The proconsul of the city attempted to persuade Polycarp with the words, “Take the oath and I’ll let you go. Curse Christ.” To this, the Bishop replied with these famous words that sealed his reputation as one of the greatest stalwarts of Christianity. “Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong,” said Polycarp. “How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” The furious crowd in the stadium collected wood and, initially, it is reported that the fire could not kill Polycarp so he had to be stabbed to death.

The Christians in Smyrna and the entire Roman world were curiously accused of atheism. By this, the Romans meant the Christians denied the many gods of the people and believed there is only one God – Jesus Christ. Those who believe in a so-called Trinity should especially note this point. Had the early Christians believed in a Trinity back then, they would not be accused of atheism which meant believing in one God. In other words, the accusation of atheism was evidence the early Christians declared only one true God, Jesus.



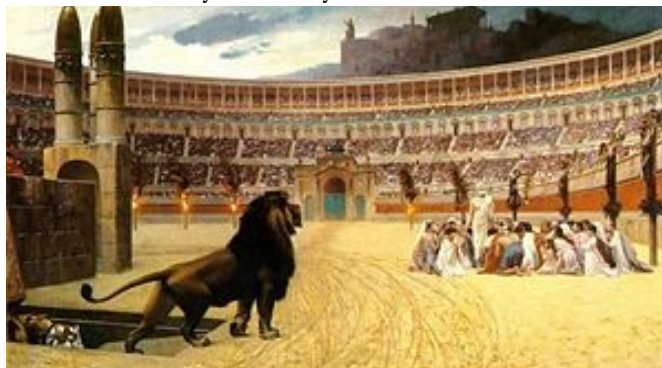
On the left is the ruins of the Agora (main center/market of old Smyrna). Like Ephesus, Smyrna promoted the cult of emperor veneration. A statute and temple to the Roman emperor Tiberius (AD 14 -37) was erected in the city. Tiberius was the emperor during the Lord's ministry in Israel. Once again, one can only imagine the difficulty the Christians of Smyrna experienced in

going about their daily business. They were expected to offer incense to the emperor as they entered the market place. The Lord shows the church of Smyrna that he is present in their daily affairs and is acutely aware of their sufferings. "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9). The Greek word for tribulation *thlipsis* refers to great discomfort that is a result of something or someone pressing down on a person. There were several sources of tribulation for the Christians of Smyrna. Contempt from unbelievers who detested the exclusiveness of the Christians who refused to worship the others gods and the emperor, disparagement from the Jewish community who actively persecuted the Christians and poverty because no one wished to employ or trade with the hated Christians. The Christians of Smyrna were not poor because of laziness – they were poor because they refused to compromise their faith in their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! It must have greatly comforted this church when they heard the Lord declare they were rich, not poor. Our definition of poor is the opposite of the Lord's.

Luke 12:15 And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

The Christians of Smyrna truly challenge our affluent western lifestyles where “more is the goal”. This church produced powerful Christian witnesses and martyrs such as Polycarp. Was this made easier because they had forsaken everything for Jesus? How many of us today would turn down job offers because we may have to lie, sell cigarettes, alcohol or do something contrary to living a holy life for the Lord? The Christians of Smyrna did not fear poverty – they feared the Lord Jesus! “But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him” (Luke 12:5). The other great “pressing” that the church of Smyrna had to endure was persecution from the Jews of Smyrna. We have studied how this same threat persisted in Ephesus also. The Jews were afraid that their own unstable relationship with the Roman authorities would be jeopardized by a new faith which claims to be the fulfilment of the Jewish prophets. After all, the Lord Jesus was just another Jewish “false prophet” whom the Romans crucified, so they were not willing to accept the rapid spread of Christianity which was provoking the Romans. Ultimately, they were concerned about their own safety – they did not want to be lumped together with this new “sect” that had “troubled” Jerusalem first and now the Roman world.

The Christian Martyrs Last Prayer. William T. Walters. 1863



What were some of the accusations hurled against these Christians? Christians in the Roman world were accused of atheism, orgies and incest. We have touched upon the first, so let us look at the other two. It must be emphasized that all were based on misunderstandings which, when corrected, the enemies of the church nevertheless continued to propagate on purpose. An orgy is defined as a wild party characterized by excessive

drinking and indiscriminate sexual activity. In fact, orgies appear to be a common phenomenon in the Roman world. Christians obviously did no such thing; they had love feasts where food was shared in common in Jesus name. Despite this, adversaries decided to call such gatherings “orgies” to malign the name of Christians. Secondly, there was the slander of incest hurled against the Christians. Unbelievers heard Christian couples refer to each other as “brother” and “sister” and jumped to the conclusion that they practiced incest. Further

inquiry would quickly reveal the misunderstanding, but the truth was never the aim of the enemies of Christ; they found it expedient to continue with their preposterous allegations because their true objective was the dismantling of this new faith.

Revelation 2:10 *Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall 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 a crown of life.*

Roman man with a crown (2nd century BC)



As if things were not bad enough, the Lord tells the saints of Smyrna that worse was to come – but for a short time. They were encouraged to hold out and endure because a great reward would be theirs. The Lord promised them a crown of life. The Greek word for “crown” is *stephanos* and referred to “the wreath or garland which was given as a prize to victors in public games,” According to James Strong (see image on left). Crowns were a common fixture in the Greco-Roman world. It was common to see people wearing these garlands in the famed Olympics and other public competitions. Christians, however, did not participate in such events because they would be required to offer incense to pagan gods and emperors. This basically

condemned Christians to be outsiders alienated from their own societies. Christians soon became part of the entertainment – fed to wild beasts and tormented in creative ways. Fortunately, the determination to destroy the early Christians was matched by their love, commitment and unshakeable faith in the promises of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Apostle Paul’s defiant declaration below demonstrates.

Romans 8:35 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

Romans 8:36 *As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.*

Romans 8:37 *Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.*

Romans 8:38 *For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,*

Romans 8:39 *Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The church of Smyrna symbolizes the church of the last days before the Lord returns. Note that the Lord did not rebuke or correct the church of Smyrna; nothing negative is recorded about this church. Does this mean they were perfect? Absolutely not! The Lord does not add to the sufferings of those who are almost overwhelmed – he wanted to compliment and edify their faith. Medics administer whatever health-improving measures they can when they encounter someone who is about to die; they do not question or criticize the person for almost dying. The church which is soon about to confront the demonic forces described in the Book of Revelation will need to pray for the grace of the church of Smyrna.

Roman catacomb



The early Christians had to find creative ways of assembling, worshipping and even burying their dead. The Romans made it forbidden to bury the dead within the city limits. Therefore, Christians would secretly make their way into catacombs, such as the one in the image on the left and worship secretly during times of severe persecution. These catacombs could be 20 meters deep in some sections. The above tells us that we ought to genuinely value the freedom we have in Christ to worship, pray and witness today; who knows when the tide may turn? It

was only in the last 200-300 years that the West began to discover words like reason, liberty, tolerance, equality, human rights and freedom of speech/worship etc. To be a Christian is an offence in many countries of the world today.

The Church of Pergamos

Revelation 2:12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;

The ruins of the church of Pergamos (Greek Pergamum) are located about 108 kilometers north of the city of Izmir (ca. 1 hour and 17 minutes by car). This province was gifted to the Roman Empire, which established the province of Asia in 129 BC. It was a prosperous region rich in agriculture and silver, among others. Like the other major cities of its time, Pergamos boasted many pagan temples and theaters. For instance, it has temples dedicated to the goddesses Athena, Hera (the wife of Zeus) and an altar to Zeus.

Ruins of Pergamum



Pergamos was known for its library with about 200,000 volumes and was second only to the Library of Alexandria. Regrettably, this city loved books and knowledge, but rejected the knowledge of the word of God. Clearly, the city of

Pergamos was prideful and rebellious to the ways of God so much so that it was not even aware of how indistinguishably fused together it was with sin. Perhaps this is why the Lord says to Pergamos that he had a “sharp sword with two edges” (Revelation 2:12). Paul wrote to the Hebrews:

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The two edged sword of the word of God alone can divide and separate from the sins that cleave like superglue to our souls. Perhaps the church of Pergamos looked around at the depravity around and reckoned

the task of bringing souls to Jesus was hopeless. The Lord Jesus reminded them of his power to divide the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow with his two edged sword. When sin appears welded inseparably to the soul of a city, Jesus can still wield his sword with divine precision; the God who separated the land from the sea and the day from the night reminded his church that the sins of Pergamos will not have dominion over them.

Revelation 2:13 *I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.*

Twice in the verses above the Lord mentions Satan. “Where Satan’s seat is” means the Devil had his base of operations in the entire region. The city, in other words, was completely dedicated to the service of every evil work the Lord hated. Once the inhabitants of a city compromise with evil, the enemy does not stop there: he will push further until the entire city is under his control. The church has no choice in such a situation but to fast and pray intensely to deny Satan a seat in their city. To the credit of the church of Pergamos, they resisted and refused to deny the name of Jesus, which is why Satan decided to kill Antipas. I wish the Bible would give us some more information about such a great hero of the faith, but the Lord wanted to assure the church that he knew of everything they were going through. These letters to the churches remind us that the Lord has the most intimate knowledge of our circumstances. He knows the challenges particular to the places we dwell and serve the Lord, he knows the specific character and temptations in our local places and he always has a word of encouragement for us. The Lord always first praised his servants and acknowledged what they suffered for his name’s sake before he proceeded to correct or reprove them. The pattern is clear: begin with that which is good – it means so much to those who carry heavy crosses for his name.

1Corinthians 10:13 *There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*

The Lord called Pergamos “Satan’s seat”. Let us proceed to consider some of the practices of this city which earned it this terrible title. Though unedifying, such a study will hopefully help us to stay vigilant; it will remind us of the depths of depravity to which humans can sink. The road in the first image led to Pergamos’s Asclepeion Temple. These temples were considered medical centers where the “doctors” would induce a sleep-like state in the patients who were assigned a place to sleep. They were expected to meet the founder of these sanctuaries named Asclepius (image below, right) in a dream and talk to the patient. Depending on the nature of the dream, a medicine or treatment would be prescribed. Asclepius’ symbol was a snake, which was chosen because it apparently knew which herbs had curative powers. Pharmacies and other medical organizations still use variations of Asclepius as their symbol. The Greeks considered the snake and its venom holy and useful in treating several illnesses. One version used by Norwegian pharmacies is Hygiea, the daughter of Asclepius,



who is depicted as the holy snake drinking from a cup (see image below left). What all of this means is that the ancient serpent’s lie to our first parents, “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5), is still alive and well in our



modern societies. Where humans speak with and honor the serpent, paradise is lost – only ruins and ashes remain. Pergamos honored the serpent – today we walk in its ruins!

***2Cor 11:3** But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.*

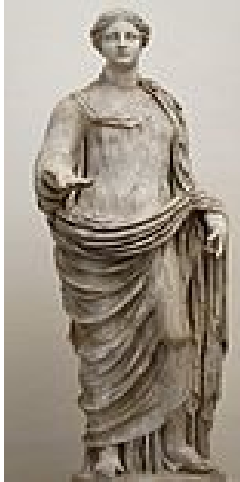
What the above tells us about the Lord's response to Pergamos' wicked culture is that there is no excuse; despite the spiritual darkness around us, the Lord has more than enough power to sustain our faith. We must never be tempted to conclude that our modern cities today, no matter where in the world we may live, are matchless in their wickedness. When the Apostle Paul kept knocking on the doors of heaven, thinking his thorn in the flesh from Satan needed urgent intervention from the Lord, the Lord responded: "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). The Devil's strategy is to convince Christians that their trials are unique, and hence an excuse to give up. The Lord Jesus gave grace to Paul and to the church of Pergamos – and he will extend the same grace to us to overcome our struggles, however insurmountable they may seem.

Ruins of the theater of Pergamos with the modern city of Bergama in the background



Revelation 2:13 *I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.*

As was mentioned earlier, Pergamos was a city dedicated to the worship of every deity known to the Greco-Roman world. Pilgrims came from everywhere to worship the deities according to their particular needs. Wisdom from Athena, food and provision from Demeter and protection from Zeus.



Demeter: goddess of harvest

Church history tells us that Antipas was appointed Bishop of Pergamum by the Apostle John. The Roman governor of Pergamum had what was called the “sword of Rome” which meant undisputed authority to pass life and death sentences upon his subjects. There was a giant sword carried aloft ceremoniously reminding the residents of this authority.

Christians were already considered enemies of Rome because they refused to worship the many gods of Rome. This was considered atheism. Antipas no doubt refused to acknowledge these gods and sealed his testimony with his life. Despite such fierce

opposition from the powers of Rome, the church of Pergamos did not deny their faith, but held on to Jesus.

One can genuinely wonder at the need to persecute and even murder Christians who were often small in numbers and peaceful members of their communities. In what way were these kind, loving and productive members of society a threat to the might of Rome? Christians won the hearts of many people because, among others, they adopted the babies of Romans whose custom it was to leave rejected infants in cliffs to die. If their only crime was to believe that Jesus Christ is the one and only God, this is an indictment on the society around them rather than anything to do with the Christians themselves. Why didn't Zeus, Athena, Demeter and Dionysus, among others, themselves pass judgment if they were really gods? In one sense, the jealous



Zeus: the sky god

fanaticism behind the worship of these deities is evidence of the existence of malevolent forces intent on keeping entire cities in the grip of Satan, which is why the Lord called Pergamos “where Satan dwelleth”.

There are several lessons we are here to learn from the churches that once existed in these cities. Nevertheless, one particular lesson appears to re-present itself repeatedly – the sheer forces of evil our first century brothers and sisters had to contend with on a daily basis. Could these same forces raise their heads once again in our time? Without a shadow of doubt! Let us not forget that the Nazis were not just a military force: many historians have also drawn attention to their obsession with occultism and paganism. In fact, Nazis, such as Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS (Schutzstaffel) were preoccupied with old Teutonic gods and infused the occult in the infamous Nurnberg rallies. Hitler had always believed that his kingdom would be the Third Reich, following on from the Holy Roman Empire (800 - 1806, itself an extension of the ancient Roman Empire) and the German Empire (1871 – 1918). There can be no doubt that, had Hitler won WW2, we would have experienced a resurrection of the pantheon of ancient gods and goddesses and a renewed persecution of Christians.

Heinrich Himmler



We live in an age of compromise; the world promotes values such as tolerance, intercultural understanding and multiculturalism. While these values are important in world which is shrinking, they should not be misconstrued to mean that Christians should suspend or discard tenets of their beliefs in the interest of so-called peaceful coexistence. While we are not called to insult and demean other belief systems – be they religious or secular – the world should not expect Christians to stop believing that Jesus is the only way, truth and life (John 14:6). It is incumbent on contemporary Christians to understand the need to train ourselves to love all, but uphold the doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ uncompromisingly. If

we are unable to do in these days, when all individuals are guaranteed the exercise of basic rights, such as

freedom of religion, in the west at least, how shall we expect to stand firm when our world relapses into the evil that characterized the ancient Greco-Roman world? Remember the words of our Lord!

Luke 23:28 But Jesus turning unto them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children.

Luke 23:29 For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.

Luke 23:30 Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.

Luke 23:31 For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?

This brings us to those who compromised in the church of Pergamos for the Lord had harsh words for these Nicolaitans.

Revelation 2:14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

Revelation 2:15 So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

What is the doctrine of Balaam? During the forty-year sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai, the Bible records the name of one Balak, a king of Moab, who hired the services of Balaam the prophet to curse Israel. While Balaam was unsuccessful in his mission, it appears he engineered another devious and effective strategy. Where magic spells and military might failed, Balaam recommended the tried and tested means of the “honey-trap” – Moabite women seduced Israelite men. The strategy was so successful that Israelite men openly fornicated in tents in the presence of the great Lawgiver, Moses, himself. “And, behold, one of the children of Israel came and brought unto his brethren a Midianitish woman in the sight of Moses, and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping before the door of the tabernacle of the congregation” (Numbers 25:6).

The Nicolaitans appear to be doctrinal descendants of the Balaamites. The early church Fathers (Irenaeus, among others) apparently believed that Nicolas, one of the seven deacons appointed by the Apostles in Acts 4, was behind this heresy. The charge goes that he believed in sharing his wife with others and vic

versa. The veracity of this is disputed with others claiming that Nicolas did no such thing, but was chaste and God-fearing all his life. Why those who practice this sin were called Nicolaitans, we do not know. However, the nature of the sin is not in question: these Christians practiced immoral sexual relations and justified it by distorting the word of God. The Lord is the ultimate Judge of such matters. He made it crystal clear – he hated their doctrine! “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20).

Clearly, when Satan was unable to destroy the church of Pergamos, he adopted the strategy he had



Dionysus: god of wine

employed so effectively with Israel; he decided to raise up individuals who preached and practiced sexual immorality. Pergamos was the “seat of Satan” and so the enemy was going to fight tooth and nail to eliminate the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must remember that Pergamos was already filled with temples dedicated to ritual prostitution. One such temple was the temple of Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of wine, orgies and madness – yes, madness! Those who worshipped this god engaged in acts of debauchery too extreme to mention here. In contemporary colloquial usage, we would say he was the god of “partying”. One could say that modern partygoers are paying homage to this ancient Greco-Roman god when the sole purpose of their gathering is to get drunk and throw all caution to the wind. They may not

invoke his name, but the ritual and objective is the same. Satan has never been concerned with the invocation of his name – he is happy to operate with multiple names worldwide. His overriding aim is to pervert the word of God and, hence, damn souls to the hell that was originally created just for him. “Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

Revelation 2:17 *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.*

Clearly, the Christians of Pergamos had some overcoming to do. Christ came into this world to overcome sin, Satan and death. “He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (I John 3:8). The Lord has demonstrated his power and victory over the forces of evil. He set an example for all who put their trust in him. There can be no compliments or crowns if struggles and battles are not overcome. I can never forget the inspiring words written on our school victory podium – the important thing is not to have won but to have fought well. The Lord Jesus wants us to fight well, and as we fight, he will extend the power of his victory to make tip the balance in favor of victory.

Revelation 3:21 *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.*

The Israelites had overcome 400 years of slavery. The promises of God to Abraham, of being God’s chosen people and a land flowing with milk and honey were tested to breaking point. Finally, the day came when God visited them and, for the first and last time in world history, a nation ate manna. “And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat” (Exodus 16:15). This was their reward for overcoming a trial that lasted 400 years. “Man did eat angels’ food: he sent them meat to the full” (Psalm 78:25). Much of human labor is exerted in the hunt for food and drink. Many lives are lost in this endeavor, but now, after having overcome 400 years of slavery, God fed the Israelites for 40 years. They did not lift a finger in the search for food; this was their reward for overcoming. The Lord Jesus promised the church of Pergamos hidden manna if they overcame. There is heavenly food waiting for those who overcome in Jesus name that no tongue has ever tasted yet. God never makes empty promises – wise is the person who respects and covets the

promises of the Lord. The manna given in the desert was not for the world; in fact, it was hidden from the world. God has ways of taking care of his people which the world is clueless.

In addition to the above, the Lord promises a white stone to those who overcome. “and will give him a white stone” (Revelation 2:17). A white stone signified acquittal in a court of law. You and I may never have stood before a judge in a court of law on this earth, but be assured of one thing: every single person who ever



lived will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). In the Roman word, there was nothing more welcoming than the sight of a judge reaching out with his hand and slowly opening his clenched fist revealing a white stone. We can only imagine the indescribable relief of the defendant. Before the judgement seat of Christ in heaven, the books will be opened and everything we have ever done will be read aloud. Undoubtedly, we will quiver

with fear, be ashamed of some of our hidden thoughts and deeds, but, no one can begin to conceive of the joy unspeakable and full of glory that will be ours when the Lord Jesus reaches out with his nail-scarred hand and open his fist to reveal the sight of a white stone.

John 8:10 *When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?*

John 8:11 *She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.*

What does it matter what the world has accused us of? Their smears, accusations and defamation will be rebuked and forever banished at the sight of the white stone in Jesus’ hands. Hence, let us derive some

cheer from so happy a thought as the fact that, one day, the Judge of all the earth will pronounce us “not guilty” all humankind once and for all. There are people who fret and worry about unjust rumors. In extreme cases, they are paralyzed by such slander and they invest much effort in clearing their good names. The enemy is pleased with his; this is precisely what he banked on – stealing your peace. Once you put out one fire, he will light another ad infinitum. The three good friends of Job were unaware the enemy was exploiting them. We do not read that any of them prayed and sought God’s mind about this issue.

Job, on the other hand, knew that it is not over until the Judge of the supreme court of the universe adjudicated on the matter. It did not matter to Job that his three friends, and even his wife, condemned him – he kept appealing to the heavenly court. “Oh that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat!” (Job 23:3). Was this not the very thought and confidence that drove righteous Job to maintain his innocence and uphold his integrity? His three friends were good men, but good men are not judges of the earth. We know in part and we see in part. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (I Corinthians 13:12). Let us withhold judgment upon the jobs of this world when everyone else reaches the same conclusion – guilty.

Job 42:8 *Therefore take unto you now seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept: lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like my servant Job.*

The church of Thyatira

Revelation 2:18 *And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass.*

The ruins of Thyatira are found in the modern city of Akhisar about 104 kilometers northeast of Izmir (one hour and four minutes drive by car). Thyatira was fortified as a military city to protect the incredibly rich city of Pergamos. A visitor would find the entire city of Thyatira filled with soldiers, tents and other paraphernalia associated with the military might that made the Romans so feared. As you can see in the image below, there is not much left of the ruins of this city today.



The Lord Jesus introduced himself as “the Son of God”. This is the only time he uses this title in the Book of Revelation. There is a good reason for this: the city of Thyatira had a temple dedicated to Apollos, who was called “the Son of God” (his father was Zeus). Once again, as was his custom with the other churches, the Lord asserted his supremacy over the false gods of these cities. Today, no one believes that Apollos is the “Son of God”,

but there are millions worldwide who wholeheartedly believe and profess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The belief that Apollos is the Son of God lies buried and lost in the ruins of Thyatira. Only truth can endure; and that Jesus is the Son of God is alive and well. That Jesus is the Son of God simply means he is the flesh and blood of Jehovah himself. Only God, and God alone, gave birth to this flesh; no human can claim fatherhood or motherhood over his flesh – he is truly the Son of God.

Luke 1:35 *And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.*

If we wish to endure forever, we must keep this truth of the heavenly sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ hallowed in our hearts and minds, which are the temples of the living God. We are the living, breathing temples in which God has chosen to deposit this greatest of truths – not some building made of stones. Next, the Lord Jesus declares to the church of Thyatira that he is the one “who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire and his feet are like fine brass” (Revelation 2:18). Thyatira was a city famous for guilds - organizations of artisans and merchants who do the same job or have the same interests. Thyatira arguably had the best organized trade guilds in the entire world at the time. Some of the guilds were dedicated to trades such as coppersmiths, dyers and the leather industry. One reason for this remarkable organization of guilds was to serve the military stationed in Thyatira.



The church of Thyatira was well acquainted with fiery furnaces and the molding of brass. Much of the military material was made of brass forged in fire. The Lord wanted this church to know that his eyes are like fire – nothing can be hid from his sight, and he both purifies and destroys with his fire. Furthermore, that the Lord appeared to John with feet like fine brass highlights his untiring efforts at walking

throughout the whole earth to spread the message of salvation in his name. Now, the Lord is walking in the midst of the church of Thyatira. The light and fire from his eyes will reveal the spiritual state of this church and put the fiery heat of his passion for righteousness on their sins, from which they must turn away. May the Lord give us feet of brass to fulfill the Great Commission!

Matthew 28:19 *Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

In one sense, the story of Thyatira, is also the story of two women: Lydia and Jezebel. Let us consider Lydia first. “And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul” (Acts 16:14). Lydia is the first convert to the Lord in Europe. She was a businesswoman from the city of



Thyatira – a seller of purple. Thyatira was famous for its red dye, also called Turkish red, from the madder root. The purple/red dye was highly prized by nobility and even royalty. Upon hearing that Jesus was a King, the Romans draped him with a purple garment to mock him. “Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man!” (John 19:5).

Lydia was either a Jew or had converted to Judaism because she is called a worshipper of God, the true God. Philippi had no Synagogue, which Paul could visit, and witness, so he joined these devout women by the river who worshipped God. After her baptism, she constrained Paul and his companions to visit her house. Later, when Paul was beaten and arrested in Philippi, he stayed in Lydia’s house when he was released. “And they went out of the prison, and entered into the house of Lydia: and when they had seen the brethren, they comforted them, and departed” (Acts 16:40). There is some speculation that Lydia left the city of Thyatira because, as a worshipper of one true God, it would have been very difficult to engage in the business of selling purple. As was mentioned previously, one had to be a member of the guilds that controlled every trade in Thyatira. In order to do business or set up a trade of any kind, one had to join the respective guild and follow the relevant rules. The guilds, without exception, had Apollos and other pagan deities as their patron gods. Every meeting started with sacrifices and prayers to these deities. In the first ever Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, the Apostles sent a letter to the churches in Asia Minor and Europe explicitly forbidding such practices.

Acts 15:29 *That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.*

On the right is a picture of the Amsterdam guild of wine merchants (1663). To be blacklisted by one's guild was tantamount to never practicing one's trade in the city again. Guilds monitored one's standing in the community and required total obedience and acquiescence. Idol worship, senseless drinking and even sexual depravity were common practices expected of members of the guilds in Thyatira. Remember that the Greek gods engaged in sexual promiscuity, hence, followers took their moral cues from these gods. How could a chaste woman such as Lydia be a member? Perhaps this is why she left Thyatira to settle in Philippi. We can only imagine the suffering the church members of Thyatira experienced in light of the above. They put the word of God above the business and privilege accorded through guild membership honoring the passionate exhortation of the apostle Paul.



1Corinthians 6:9 *Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,*

1Corinthians 6:10 *Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.*

1Corinthians 6:11 *And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.*

Thankfully, most of us live in countries where such pressure would be considered unacceptable. Nevertheless, we know that employers can and have pressured employees to engage in practices which contravene the word of God. Some years ago, I recall a case in Norway where an employee was fired because she refused to drink alcohol with her colleagues. Her boss was taken to task by the media because he officially stated “unsociable” as the justification for firing the woman. The church of Thyatira had none to protect and defend its interests – they were at the mercy of the ungodly guilds. We ought to pause here and reflect! Are we

engaged in practices through our jobs that violate the word of God? We shall soon see that the Lord was provoked to anger by the compromise of some of the church members of Thyatira, hence we cannot expect a different response from the Lord. Father Abraham left everything in Ur of the Chaldees – his wealth, relatives and reputation. See how the Lord has rewarded Abraham! The Apostles forsook everything also, and they have become household names inheriting heaven and earth. If we are not ashamed to identify with the Lord Jesus, then he will not be ashamed to identify with us.

2Timothy 1:8 *Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God.*

Hebrews 11:16 *But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.*

Christians are aware that there is a time coming when the antichrist will demand spiritual allegiance from every individual in the world. The demands of the guilds of Thyatira will pale in comparison to the global demand for worship and subservience from the antichrist. “And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads. And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name” (Revelation 13:16, 17). Significantly, the church of Thyatira did not experience the same levels of persecution as the other churches. Thyatira was not even religious to the same extent as Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamos. There is no record of any compulsion to offer incense to the pagan gods or Caesar. The indications are that the more relaxed and tolerant spiritual climate in Thyatira led some Christians in the church to compromise their faith. Are Christians today, who enjoy high levels of freedom in western democracies in danger of compromising their faith when serious persecution breaks out? Have we become soft and spiritually “flabby” having been fed on a diet of human rights and the right to sue? I am not saying that we should pray or hope for persecution, but we need to learn from the church of Thyatira. In the next section, we will look closely at the nature of temptations arising from within the church of Thyatira in the guise of the second woman, Jezebel.

Revelation 2:19 *I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.*

Revelation 2:20 *Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.*

It is often when we repent and return to the Lord that we hear from him and receive directions. The church of Thyatira was complimented for producing more fruit for the Lord before the Lord's message arrived through John. God always sees the good and the bad and registers both carefully. Once again, his practice is to always mention the good before the bad because he loves us and wishes to encourage us. Scholars are divided about whether this particular troublesome woman, Jezebel, had another name but was called Jezebel because her sins appear to mirror those of the infamous Jezebel the wife of Israel's King Ahab. "But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up" (I Kings 21:25). To begin with, both Jezebels believed they were prophetesses. The first Jezebel appointed herself the high priestess of the cult of Baal with over 400 false prophets. The second one convinced the church of Thyatira that she was a prophet of the Lord Jesus Christ. Unclean spirits of deception are constantly looking for such women through which they can seduce God's people. The name "Izevel" means "Baal is husband to"- and is an apt reminder of Satan's desire to take certain corrupt women as his wife in order to destroy the people of God.



On the left is a picture of a monument built to commemorate Elijah's slaying of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. From this mountain one can see the entire plain of Armageddon. The first is where the battle for the spiritual future of Israel was fought and the second is where the spiritual future of the entire world will be decided when the Lord Jesus returns. It is not coincidental, in my opinion, that in both these poignant places, the spirit of Jezebel – the spirit of seduction and sorcery played a major role. The spirit of Jezebel is one which gains a foothold in

the church, just as Jezebel, a Phoenician, somehow married a King of Israel. Next, because the spirit of Jezebel is demonically inspired, it begins to hold sway of several key people in the church. Before long, Jezebel dominates the church through a combination of sorcery, charm and seduction.

2Thess 2:8 *And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:*

2Thess 2:9 *Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,*

2Thess 2:10 *And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved.*

2Thess 2:11 *And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie:*

2Thess 2:12 *That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*

The problem with the church of Thyatira was one of leadership. The pastor of the church permitted this Jezebel to teach – he was hence responsible for what transpired in his church. The souls of the saints whom Jezebel destroyed was his fault; he surely knew what she was saying and doing – teaching people to commit fornication and eat food sacrificed to idols. These are very serious sins indeed! Ahab was the King of Israel but failed to protect Israel's spiritual integrity so God had to raise up one of the most fearless and rough prophets of the entire Bible, Elijah. God will always raise up opposition to the Jezebels and Ahabs of this world who arrogantly seek to destroy his church.

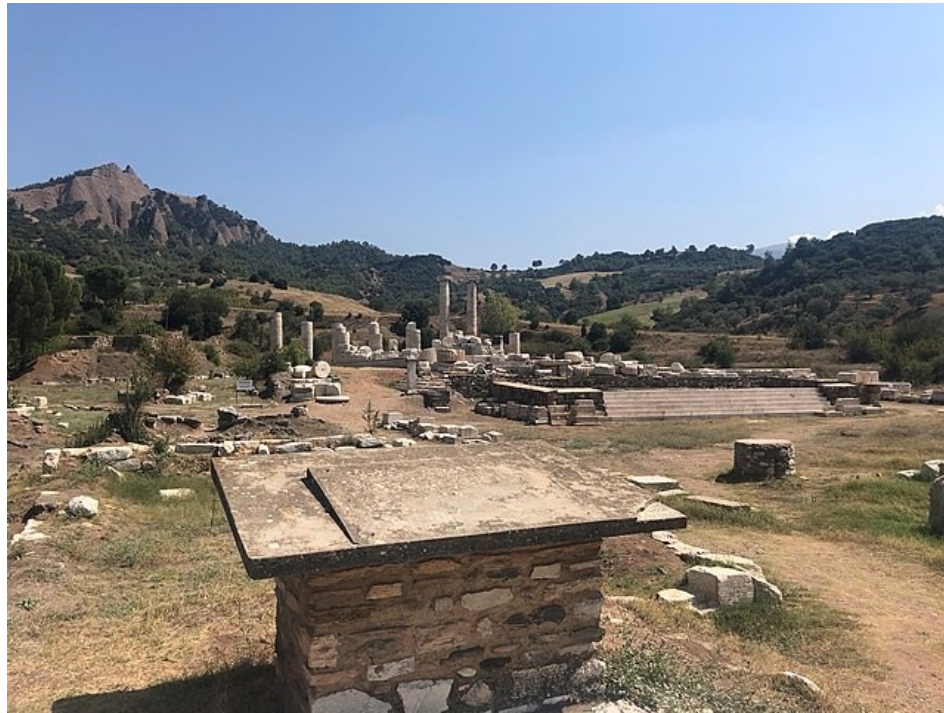
1Kings 21:23 *And of Jezebel also spake the LORD, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.*

Rev 2:23 *And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.*

What lessons can we draw from this stain on the name of the church of Thyatira? Clearly, we cannot be lax in allowing anyone and anything to be preached from the pulpit. It is the pastor's responsibility primarily to discern whatever is said, taught or done in the church. The enemy like a lion is walking around the church to find its weakest entrance. Let us all resolve to keep the pulpit clean, holy and sound in doctrine. "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (I Timothy 4:16).

The Church of Sardis

Revelation 3:1 *And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.*



Above is a picture of the ruins of Sardis with the altar of the Temple of Artemis (Diana) in the foreground. Today, the ancient ruins of the city of Sardis are found in the ruins of a place called *Sart* in Turkey which is about 87 kms east of Izmir (about one hours drive). The Lord Jesus begins his letter with the words, “These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God”. Sadly, the church of Sardis was the only church which the Lord does not begin by complimenting at all. Rather, he launches straight into a rebuke after the first verse. Could it be that he was reminding them of his power to renew their deadness by declaring that he had the

seven Spirits of God? In other words, there is no excuse for anyone or any church to backslide and stay in a poor state spiritually – the Lord Jesus Christ is the possessor and giver of the spirits of grace. All we have to do is call upon his name and he will renew us with the spirits of grace that we lack. The number seven is the number of perfection; put differently, whatever we lack, the Lord can supply. The seven graces or gifts of the Spirit perhaps should not be taken literally to refer to precisely seven Spirits, but a metaphor for the fullness of divine graces. Nevertheless, the Bible does appear to refer to seven different graces emanating from the Lord now and then. Let us consider one such list of seven for our edification.

Romans 12:6 *Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of faith;*

Romans 12:7 *Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching;*

Romans 12:8 *Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.*

Prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, ruling and mercy are the gifts mentioned in Paul's list. We must understand that such gifts are indeed spiritual gifts having their source and proceeding from the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and not some random personality trait a person possesses. Sardis may have neglected the gifts of the Spirit of Jesus, but the Lord has an infinite supply at hand. The earth's sources of energy will ultimately expire, but as the prophet Isaiah declares, "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

What was the problem with the church of Sardis? Apparently, this church managed to deceive itself into thinking it was well and alive when it was in reality spiritually dead. The worst form of deception is self-deception. "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (Revelation 3:1). We are reminded of the apostle Paul's admonition to the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" (2 Corinthians 13:5). This can only happen if Christians neglect critical prayer which shines a light into the soul. "The spirit of man is the candle of the LORD, searching all the inward parts of the belly"

(Proverbs 20:27). Sardis was the first place in the world where gold coins with a standardized purity were used in the monetary system. This made the city very wealthy. The Greek King, Croesus (560-540 BC), is credited with this invention and Sardis become synonymous with minting of gold and silver coins. (images below).



Could it be that the Christians of Sardis, unlike Smyrna, were heavily involved in the booming trade that piggybacked on an economy benefitting from the gold and silver? This brings to mind the warning of the Lord about the dangers of riches that choke the faith.

Matthew 13:22 He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.

When wealth increases, the temptation is to tolerate some things which we know are contrary to the word and Spirit of God. Sin corrodes spiritual strength and the two are locked in a mortal battle unto death. We are not told what the specific sin of the church of Sardis was, but we know they were deluded into thinking they were

alive, but were dead. It takes the Spirit of the Lord to reveal our true spiritual condition, not ourselves or other Christians. Contrast the above with the words of the apostle Peter to the man who was lame and begging at the gate called beautiful. “Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk” (Acts 3:6). The Christians of Sardis may have taken pride in their gold and silver which became a source of pride and comfort to them, but Peter had none – only Jesus living in him. Silver and gold has deceived many into thinking they can buy whatever they want, but money has never bought salvation and happiness, only the Lord Jesus Christ can grant this.



The Greek myth of King Midas is well known. King Midas asked the Greek god, Dionysus, to grant him the ability to turn everything he touched into gold. Initially, Midas was overjoyed when trees, flowers, pots and pans all turned into gold. However, he soon realized that his gift was a curse when even his water and food turned into gold. He finally starved to death. What is less well known is that one version of this myth revolves around the river Pactolus (left image) which runs through the city of Sardis. The river Pactolus was where the gold and

silver of Sardis was found (called electrum). In addition, there was a real king called Midas from the region east of Sardis (Phrygia) who did commit suicide. Such myths, although perhaps based on a distortion of real events, have captured the imagination of generations ever since because they contain eternal truths which are universal: the love of gold ultimately calcifies and leads to death. This is what happened to the church of Sardis – they slowly calcified and died. Like its legendary king, Midas, the church of Sardis had to realize that it's gold, silver, and wealth was killing it. May the Lord Jesus Christ identify and declare to us the names of the enemies of our faith!

In addition to its great wealth based on the gold and silver from the river Pactolus, we can see the shallowness and superficiality of Sardis in its famous Greek gymnasium. Significantly, this gymnasium has been found in remarkable condition – a witness to the empty pursuits of this city. The word gymnasium has its origins in nakedness - *gymnos*. Only males above the age of 18 were admitted and exercised according to various prescriptions naked. In ancient Greece, the practice of older men have pedophile relations with boys was not uncommon. This practice is referred to as pederasty and is even openly depicted in Greek vases from the time. Philosophers would discuss ideas and teach naked in these gymnasiums. This physical and educational aspect is why our educational institutions still bear the same names. Until the 1990s, for example, Norway's high schools were called *Gymnasium* (abbreviated to *gymnas*). Furthermore, those trained in the gymnasium would often compete naked in games held in the honor of Greek gods. Sardis had a very prominent gymnasium (see remains of the gymnasium of Sardis below).



What can we learn from this? Let us be clear: there is no clear evidence that the Christians of Sardis engaged in all these practices but there is no evidence to the contrary either. What is clear, however, is that the city of Sardis was filled with empty and sinful pleasures, one of which was the gymnasium which corrupted the souls of the youth and men. This brings me to the topic of our modern gymnasiums – the gym. There is nothing wrong whatsoever in attending to one's physical health; in fact, the body of the Christian is the Temple of the Lord Jesus Christ and we should take care of it. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (I Corinthians 3:16). In a world where food is abundant and relatively cheap, and modern transport and comforts enable people to live more sedentary lives, it is no wonder we have an epidemic of obesity. We must train and discipline the body and our appetites as best we can. I have a sign on the door of our training room in the basement with the message "Take care of your body; it is the only place you have to live" (attributed to Jim Rohn).

However, modern gyms or training studios often play loud and ungodly music and many of the customers are dressed inappropriately. The pumping loud, suggestive music combined with almost naked bodies swarming all over the place cannot be good for the Christian soul. In my humble opinion, Christians need to pray and reconsider membership in these modern gymnasiums which corrode the soul. Could the Christians of Sardis have been comfortable participating in these places of debauchery? Something was killing their spiritual vigor clearly, and these gymnasiums may have played a role. Could they have rationalized and convinced themselves that nothing was wrong? Are we as Christians also partaking in some activities which are hurting our souls while we deceive ourselves into thinking they are fine – everyone does them?

1Thessalonians 5:22 *Abstain from all appearance of evil.*

1Thessalonians 5:23 *And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1Peter 2:11 *Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;*

Revelation 3:2 *Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.*

Revelation 3:3 *Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.*

Thankfully, there was still a glimmer of hope for the church of Sardis. “Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent” (Rev 3:3). Sardis was the first church to receive the Gospel through the apostle John in Asia Minor. They have a powerful testimony to defend. This underscores the importance of testimony and reflection on one’s Christian journey. It is not emotionalism to witness to others and in the church about how Jesus first saved us and transformed our lives. We will be reminded of the greatest blessing in our lives. To forget is to lose! We cannot afford to lose our salvation. Consider the apostle Paul! He never got tired of mentioning his experience on the Road to Damascus. Normally, we associate nothing good with Damascus in the pages of the Bible (apologies to any Syrians who may read this). Death, destruction and enmity towards Israel comes to mind when one thinks of Damascus. Now, however, glory be to Jesus, something wonderful came back – not only for Israel – but the entire world. Paul never forgot this experience and shared it with kings, queens, governors and all of us as long as the Book of Acts will exist. Let us remember how we received and heard, as the Lord commanded the church of Sardis. To forget is to die!

Mark 6:51 *And he went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered.*

Mark 6:52 *For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened.*

Now the Lord proceeded to issue a dire warning to the church of Sardis: “If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee” (Revelation 3:3). Unless we understand the history of Sardis, we will miss out on the powerful import of this warning. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia records the following about the city of Sardis in 549 BC.

At the base [i.e. of Sardis] flowed the river Pactolus which served as a moat rendering the city practically impregnable. Through the failure to watch, however, the acropolis had been successfully scaled in 549 BC by a Median soldier, and in 218 by a Cretan (Revelation 3:2, 3).

In other words, the city of Sardis had painful memories of historical failures to watch the city which they considered impossible to conquer. The story goes that the great Persian king, Cyrus (600 – 530 BC), surrounded the city and could not find a way to breach the defenses of Sardis. However, a soldier of Sardis carelessly opened a secret door which led into the city thinking no one was observing him. Cyrus instructed his soldiers to make a deafening noise in another area to lure the army of Sardis away from the secret door. Once this was done, some of his elite soldiers entered through the secret door and took the city. The people of Sardis were painfully aware of their history. One could say this was the city that was destroyed because they failed to watch their enemies. Make no mistake – the Lord Jesus is Lord also over the histories of the world. He speaks in the language and with the knowledge that we understand. The message was clear to the church of Sardis – you are careless and soon Satan and his forces will destroy you unless you wake up and watch spiritually. There are two kinds of watchmen in the Bible. Which one are we? Who is watching over the church of your city?



Isaiah 56:10 *His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber.*

Isaiah 62:6 *I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence,*

Isaiah 62:7 *And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he*

make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

The Church of Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7 *And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth;*

The city of Philadelphia (called Alaşehir today) still exists and is connected to the city of Izmir (Smyrna) by a 105 km railway. There are indeed many parallels between the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. Firstly, both churches were persecuted and yet faithful. This is why the Lord Jesus reassures them by reminding them that he is always faithful: “he that is true”. History records that the Philadelphians were severely betrayed by Rome many times, hence they were disappointed, cynical and bitter. The vineyards of Philadelphia rivalled those of Rome. In fact, they were such a threat that the Emperor ordered the destruction of their vineyards so



the Roman ones could flourish. This had a devastating impact on their economy for which they harbored much bitterness towards Rome. In addition, many earthquakes in the course of its history hit the city. At times, the

Roman Emperors reached out with relief while they were ignored at other times. In light of this, the words of the Lord, “he that is true” was a declaration of the Lord’s loyalty to their welfare. The powers of the world

cannot be trusted – they are capricious and unreliable. On the contrary, the Bible states, “As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Romans 9:33). We are reminded of King Asa of the Bible of whom its is written:

2Ch 16:12 *And Asa in the thirty and ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great: yet in his disease he sought not to the LORD, but to the physicians.*

2Ch 16:13 *And Asa slept with his fathers, and died in the one and fortieth year of his reign.*

The good news is that the church of Philadelphia never trusted in horses or chariots, but in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were faithful, like Smyrna. I do not think it is a coincidence that the two cities still survive today and are linked by a 105 km railway. It is as if they hold hands in unity underpinned by their historical love and perseverance for the faith. Philadelphia means “the city of brotherly love”. King Eumenes II of Pergamon (197–160 BC) founded the city in 189 B.C. and named it Philadelphia (one who loves his brother) in honor of his brother, Attalus II, who demonstrated great love and loyalty to Eumenes despite pressure from the Romans to the contrary. The great American Quaker, William Penn, named the American state where he settled Philadelphia in 1682 in honor of the ancient city. Quakers, such as William Penn, believe in making the world a better place. Every single person is the light of God, according to them. Human rights, justice, freedom of conscience, community life and the equality of all beings are cornerstone beliefs in the Quaker faith. They were the first to speak out against slavery in the USA and endeavored to find common ground and understanding with the Native Americans. This is indeed the spirit of “brotherly love”. The city of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, USA, is



William Penn



Today, the modern city of Philadelphia (left) is one of the most advanced and prosperous cities in the world. What an honor God has bestowed to the tiny little church of Philadelphia in Asia Minor! We can be certain they would be astonished to know that one of the great cities in the world is named in honor of their brotherly love, faithfulness and perseverance in

the name of Jesus Christ.

***Rev 3:8** I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.*

Church history tells us that the Christians of Philadelphia were Jews who were cast out of the Synagogue. We must remember that the first Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere initially continued to worship in the local Synagogues. They did not perceive their beliefs as a new, separate movement from the old Mosaic faith, but a fulfilment. They were guided by the words of the Lord: “But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6). In addition, the Lord had said, “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The apostle Paul also reminded the Roman Christians, “As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes” (Romans 11:28). The natural children of Abraham, the Israelites, were first given



the invitation to receive the long promised and expected Messiah, Jesus Christ. Sadly, their understanding of the Messiah was not compatible with what their Rabbis had taught them. Despite the scriptures clearly indicating that the Messiah is none other than Jehovah in flesh, they could not accept this.

Isaiah 9:6 *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be*

called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Micah 5:2 *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.*

Once the Jews at Philadelphia realized the Christian Jews were proclaiming that Jesus was Jehovah manifested in flesh, they were appalled and concluded these Christian Jews must be expelled from the Synagogue. To be expelled from the Synagogue was a disaster for Jews in many ways. Once a Jew was struck off the Synagogue register, he or she would never be welcomed into the premises again. Such a person was shunned and treated as one would a leprous person. The doors of the Synagogue would be shut – the doors would be closed and no one could open it. Once we understand this context, we can appreciate the words of the Lord, “I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (Revelation 3:8). The doors of the Synagogue may have been shut to these Christian Jews, but Jesus opened doors that no man could shut for them. We can only imagine the joy these Christians experienced when the letter about open doors was read to them in Philadelphia. Tears of gratitude must have streamed down their faces as they worshipped the Lord.

They now knew how keenly the Lord was aware of their sacrifice and suffering. Typically, many Christians forget that the Lord is intimately following their predicaments and challenges. The world may close doors because of our faith, but always remember the Lord will open doors that no man can shut. We must also consider another enormous challenge these Philadelphian Christians faced. If one was struck off from the register of the



Synagogue, it meant there was no exemption from the command to declare that Caesar was god. Jews in the Roman world were exempted from the command to worship Caesar as god. Julius Caesar first granted this privileged legal status which was renewed every one hundred years. Only those whose names were registered in the Synagogue were exempt. Hence, for one's name to be deleted was a great risk to one's life. We can only imagine the fear that enveloped the Philadelphian Christians who were excommunicated from the Synagogue. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus let them know they had nothing to fear: the Lord would open a new and miraculous door for them. Isn't this typical of the manner in which the enemy attacks us? His goal is to frighten us with abrupt and overwhelming disaster, as he did with Job. The word of God has a response:

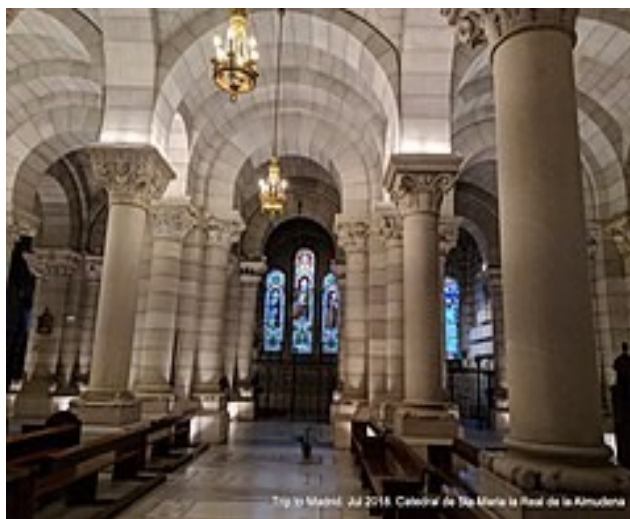
***Isaiah 59:19** So shall they fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun. When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him.*

Finally, the Lord makes another great promise to the beleaguered Philadelphians: “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name” (Revelation 3:12). The Philadelphian

Christians loved the house of God and were clearly devastated when they were expelled from the Synagogue. The Lord draws upon the metaphor of a pillar in the house of God to demonstrate his plan for them. A pillar not only never leaves a building, it is crucial to the structural integrity of the building. In other words, these Christians will be given crucial roles in the house of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This wonderful metaphor of a pillar in the house of God echoes the prayer and longing of King David. “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple (Psalm 27:4). One also recalls to mind devout servants of God such as Anna and Simeon who loved the house of God so much they metaphorically became pillars in the house of God. Of Anna, Luke writes:

Luke 2:37 *And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.*



Earlier, it was noted that the ancient city of Philadelphia was subject to frequent earthquakes. These Christians were accustomed to the sight of collapsed buildings and embraced a sense of impermanence due to the many earthquakes. Given this background, they certainly shouted many Hallelujahs and Amens when the Lord promised to make them pillars in his house – the Lord Jesus is the one who shakes all things, nothing can shake him, and he was extending this sense of stability and permanence to the Philadelphian Christians.

Haggai 2:7 *And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.*

The Church of Laodicea

Revelation 3:14 *And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;*

Laodicea was roughly 160 kilometers east of Ephesus. The city benefitted from its advantageous position as a major trade route and unique black wool, which made the city very wealthy. The black wool was very expensive and was associated with the inhabitants of Laodicea who proudly wore exquisite black garments made from the famous black wool of the city. The city was also a banking center of the ancient world. The trade in gold was central to this banking trade.



In addition to the above, Laodicea had a famous medical school which produced eye salve from the powder of a particular Phrygian stone mixed with oil. It was apparently so effective that the celebrated Greek physician, Galen, highly recommended it. Such was the wealth of Laodicea that its citizens refused any help from the Emperor Nero in 60 A.D. when the city was devastated by an earthquake. Rome honored Laodicea with the title “free city”. What we see is a city which was very blessed to have several natural resources and gifted people.



Furthermore, archaeologists were surprised to discover that Laodicea had not one, but two amphitheaters with a total holding capacity of 20,000 people. It was uncommon for a city of the caliber of Laodicea to boast two amphitheaters unless it was immensely rich. Only very wealthy cities could afford such amphitheaters and cultivate the arts in their leisure time. The picture that emerges of Laodicea is a city with proud and fiercely independent citizens. There is nothing wrong with this except when this attitude extends to the church. It has been said that whereas the Lord had only praise and encouragement for the church of Philadelphia, he had only warning and rebuke for the church of Laodicea. The Devil has always employed two tactics against the church. He first seeks to overwhelm and discourage with persecution. When this fails, he tries wealth and fame to seduce the church away from its mission. In Laodicea, it sadly appears the church fell victim to the second tactic. Let us carefully consider the main problem with the church of Laodicea.

Revelation 3:17 *Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.*

“I have need of nothing”. The church of Laodicea reached a point where they felt they needed nothing and no one, no help from the Emperor, and nothing from the Lord Jesus. They fell into the error that Moses warned Israel to avoid when they entered the Land of Canaan and became wealthy.

Deut 6:10 *And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not,*

Deut 6:11 *And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full;*

Deut 6:12 *Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.*

Deut 8:17 *And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth.*

Deut 8:18 *But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day.*

The Laodiceans were slain by the deceitfulness of riches. It numbed their faith and passion for the Lord Jesus who was marginalized by their arrogance. However, there is some good news for such Christians. The church of Laodicea was still the church of Jesus Christ; this church was still in the golden lampstand as one of the seven churches. This is why the Lord did not stop knocking on the door of the hearts of the saints in Laodicea. “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). Our riches may numb us spiritually and marginalize the Lord, but he will keep knocking at our hearts because of his great love for us.

Land flowing with milk and honey



God promised the children of Israel a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8). God did not want his people to be slaves for Pharaoh because the non-stop, backbreaking labor did not afford them time to seek his face. In taking them to a land that flowed with milk and honey, God wanted them to know they would have sufficient time to seek his face. God would command the land to bless his people so no human can boast about their ingenuity. “The LORD shall command the blessing upon thee in thy storehouses, and in all that thou settest thine hand unto; and he shall bless thee in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee” (Deut 28:8). God commanded God commanded the land to do so in order for his people to serve him. Amen! Some scholars believe the seven churches symbolize seven eras of world history since the establishment of the church age. They reckon we are living in the age of the church of Laodicea. This is debatable. However, there is an uncanny resemblance between the spirit of this age and the errors of the church of Laodicea, which is

mainly evident in the material comfort of our age. The Lord himself warned about the power of riches to neutralize faith.

Mark 4:18 *And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word,*

Mark 4:19 *And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.*

When the world looks at what they consider the faces of the modern church of Jesus Christ, they see extremely wealthy leaders who come across as no different than the church of Laodicea. Consider the net worth of some of these people. Kenneth Copeland: 760 million USD; Joel Osteen: 100 million USD; Benny Hinn: 60 million USD; Creflo Dollar: 25 million USD; T.D. Rick Warren: 25 million USD; Jakes: 20 million USD; Joyce Meyer 8 million USD. Several of these preachers built their ministries not on the true Gospel of



Jesus Christ, but an exploitative “Christian capitalist” ideology called the Gospel of prosperity.

This ideology has distorted scriptures such as Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. They argue that faith is “just” a substance that one can command or manipulate to work on one’s behalf and

produce wealth. In reality, the writer of Hebrews was expounding on the faith of Noah, Moses etc., which had nothing to do with wealth and material things. The heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 actually encountered great suffering and persecution for their faith. They are described as “destitute” and not wealthy.

Rev 3:15 *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.*

Rev 3:16 *So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*

The city of Laodicea was sandwiched between two cities: Colossae and Hierapolis. Significantly, Colossae was known for its fresh cold waters which had their source in the nearby mountains while Hierapolis was famous for its hot springs which left beautiful terraced carbonated minerals (see image below). The hot springs of Hierapolis still attract thousands of tourists each year. Laodicea had no water source of its own but relied on pipes or aqueducts to use the force of gravity and bring water down to Laodicea. Not only did the water become lukewarm, but stank because of the minerals by the time it reached Laodicea.



As the Lord often did when teaching his people lessons, he referred to natural phenomena his listeners would immediately recognize. We can imagine that from then on the Laodicean Christians would feel humbled whenever they drank of their lukewarm and smelly waters. They would be reminded of the Lord's rebuke regarding their spiritual condition.

Rev 3:18 *I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.*

The Laodiceans had gold in abundance, but not gold tried in the fire of the Lord Jesus. In other words, their faith was untested; Jesus invited them to submit their faith to the trials and tribulations that accompany the true Christian life. Their expensive black wool was compared to nakedness in the Lord's eyes. In addition, the Lord offered white garments washed in his blood to cover their nakedness. Consider what a blow this was to the Laodiceans sense of pride in their garment made from black wool. Not least, the Lord counsels them to buy eye slave from him – an eye salve that would open their eyes to discover their fallen and backslidden spiritual condition.

Is there anything in this life that has also blinded us to the life Christ has called us to live? Have we taken refuge in the wealth and splendor of material things like the Laodiceans? There is hope; we are still part of the church of Jesus Christ. He knocks on the door and calls us to repentance.