

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 6 - Chapter 2 Continued

Love, or better the lack of love, was the issue God had with the Believing assembly at Ephesus. In the 1st letter in Revelation chapter 2, Ephesus was commended for being doctrinally sound and for persevering against not only pagan influences but also against false apostles who apparently claimed to be bringing godly teaching. There is little other way to take this indictment against these lying apostles than to mean they held themselves up as, or thought themselves to be, Believers. The Ephesus leadership had the wisdom to test these visiting apostles using the best way available to them.....and to us. They compared what those apostles said against God's Word. And God's Word in that era was the Old Testament.

There are many opinions about exactly what this loss of love in the Ephesian congregation was indicating. The most typical explanation in modern times is that their love for Christ substantially diminished and they instead opted for obeying rules and maintaining a strict vision of purity of worship. Another popular viewpoint is that they lost their zeal for practicing the Gospel. I don't see either of these explanations as likely but they have become the predominant stance. Rather in my opinion the sense of it is that the love that at first characterized the Ephesian Believers was manifested in a passion to show loving-kindness to one another and to demonstrate Christ's love in their actions towards those who were outside their group; their local community. This meant that at first they were outbound-focused in their ministry as opposed to serving mainly themselves.

Christ emphasized that we are saved for a purpose; and the purpose is not merely so that each of us can have a safe, secure and happy personal future that includes residing in Heaven when we die. It was never meant that we walk an aisle, pray the sinner's prayer and then retire from service to God and doing good deeds for our fellow man. Yeshua said this:

CJB John 15:16 *You did not choose me, I chose you; and I have commissioned you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last; so that whatever you ask from the Father in my name he may give you.*

And to these same Ephesians Paul said:

CJB Ephesians 2:10 *For we are of God's making, created in union with the Messiah Yeshua for a life of good actions already prepared by God for us to do.*

So love combined with action is to be the mission of every Believer. And when either love or action is removed from the equation we are not being obedient and our mission will not be effective. The consequence threatened upon the Ephesians for their actions without love was that they would cease to exist as a God-authorized assembly of Believers; they would be removed from the body of Christ followers because God would banish them from Himself just

as He did with Adam and Eve. What is God's intended result from this banishment?

CJB Revelation 2:7 *Those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Messianic communities. To him winning the victory I will give the right to eat from the Tree of Life which is in God's Gan-'Eden.*"

We are directly told in Revelation 2:7 that for those Ephesians who turn from this sin of actions without love, they will eat from the Tree of Life. So correspondingly those who do not turn.....the opposite will be the result. What does eating from the Tree of Life represent? Eternal life with God. Recall that this letter is to Believers; so the threat is aimed at Believers.

The next letter is to the Believers of Smyrna. Let's re-read the contents of that letter.

RE-READ REVELATION 2:8 – 11

This very short letter brings with it full commendation of the congregation at Smyrna and contains no admonishments of anything that is displeasing to God; something that any Believing congregation would long to hear. However it does contain a warning of persecution that is coming.

Verse 8 begins the letter by reiterating who the message-giver is; it is the One who is the First and the Last, who died and came alive again. So we have this divine being describing Himself by mixing traditional Old Testament descriptions of God the Father (the First and the Last) with traditional New Testament descriptions of God the Son (died and came alive again). And it is somewhat surprising that this divine being continues to avoid identifying Himself by name. How easy it would seem be to just say "this is Yeshua" or some positive, definitive identification; but He doesn't. It is actually also characteristic of John to describe God in a mysterious if not ambiguous way just as the divine being of John's revelation vision is doing. Looking at earlier writings of John we find that he begins his Gospel account with these memorable words:

CJB John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ All things came to be through him, and without him nothing made had being.*

John is presenting us with the paradox for which he has no solution; he only knows that it is the truth. This is the very definition of faith. Assuming we take the term "the Word" to mean something like the pre-incarnate Son, and we take the term "God" to indicate the Father or the Godhead, then when we look at John's words with intellectual honesty he says plainly that on the one hand the Word was WITH God (meaning a certain distinction between God and the Word must exist), and on the other hand the Word **was** God (meaning that there is also some kind of inexplicable organic unity between God and the Word). These are largely incompatible attributes relative to the 4 dimensional Universe we live in, hence the paradox. Our God is at once incomprehensible, and yet sufficiently knowable for us to have a relationship with Him and to obey His set-down laws and commands.

Humans in every age have been tempted to go beyond faith in God and obedience to God by defining and redefining His attributes and substance; the results have included a shattering of our faith into thousands of denominations. It is futile, if not self deceptive, for we, His worshippers, to believe that we or any human can adequately comprehend this mysterious paradox of the substance and form of Almighty God that John lays out for us in his Gospel and follows up in the Book of Revelation. As you will soon see, at the beginning of each of the 7 letters, this divine-being of John's vision describes Himself a bit differently....still without adding His name. Or better He continues to add various bits of information to give us a better picture of His nature. In the 1st letter to the Ephesians, He was ***“the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold menorahs”***. Now to begin the 2nd letter to Smyrna He is ***“the First and the Last, who died and came alive again”***. Thus it is critical that as we read what John recorded for us to take what we are given as-is. And that includes accepting, in faith, the often non-standard descriptions of God in His various forms and roles that we find in Revelation and being less concerned about assigning a specific name that neither God nor John gives to us.

The city of Smyrna was a very wealthy port city and every bit as much an idolatrous cult center as was Ephesus. Emperor worship was Smyrna's hallmark. About 40 miles north of Ephesus it is not mentioned in the New Testament as a place that Paul or any other evangelist visited so it is unclear how the Gospel came to the city. But the words of this letter show that the city had at least one synagogue, and likely more, meaning it had a substantial Jewish population. The thing to take away is that the Believing congregation of Smyrna was a tiny minority and so didn't have it any easier than the Believers of Ephesus.

Within this context, then verse 9 is an important one to get right. When laying various Bible versions side-by-side we see a number of somewhat different interpretations of this verse. Let's compare just three.

CJB Revelation 2:9 *"I know how you are suffering and how poor you are (though in fact you are rich!), and I know the insults of those who call themselves Jews but aren't- on the contrary, they are a synagogue of the Adversary. (Rev. 2:9 CJB)*

KJV 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. (Rev. 2:9 KJV)*

NET Revelation 2:9 *'I know the distress you are suffering and your poverty (but you are rich). I also know the slander against you by those who call themselves Jews and really are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (Rev. 2:9 NET)*

None of these are wrong, per se, but some either highlight or miss entirely some important points that are there in the Greek. For instance, the CJB and the NET seem to overlook two important Greek words that begin this verse: ***ergon*** and ***thlipsis***. The KJV does a much better job saying "I know thy ***works*** and ***tribulation***....". ***Ergon***, works, is exactly what it sounds like; it means acts, deeds, and things that are done. So God is telling Smyrna that He is well aware

of the actions and activities that they have been doing and this is in the context of doing things that promote the Good News and necessarily involve active outbound ministry. And at the same time they are suffering **thlipsis**, tribulation, for it. **Thlipsis** actually means to press together, or to apply pressure. It is the same word that is used to describe pressing grapes until the juice comes out. Only when used metaphorically does it take on the sense of oppression or distress. Therefore we aren't told directly what this pressure or distress is that the Believers of Smyrna are experiencing, but clearly it has to do with their trust in Messiah Yeshua and the works they do that come from that trust. Considering the context of the verse that **thlipsis** is used in, then it seems likely that it is not that the Believers are under some widespread physical abuse but rather that they are under constant pressure from friends and family and the local society because the Believers embrace a different faith than the others. Nothing is more common or powerful among all societies than the pressure to conform to a standard of the majority. The pressures are usually additive with none being particularly intense. From being poked fun at, to not being invited to social gatherings, to being spoken about negatively, as sentient and emotional creatures human beings indeed suffer from being regularly shunned and shamed. One doesn't have to be beaten to feel beaten down. In time it can become exhausting and make you doubt what you're doing that makes you different from the societal norm.

The other thing I want to say about the word **thlipsis** is that because a proper translation of this word can be "tribulation", then we find **thlipsis** used in relation to the End Times. And especially among Evangelical Christians, who hasn't heard of the Tribulation and/or the Great Tribulation? Or as it is in Greek, the **thlipsis** and **megas thlipsis**. However **thlipsis** is in reality a verb even though Christian translators have at times used it like English uses a noun. That is, **thlipsis** expresses an action but Christian interpreters have also used (better, misused) the word as a name. Thus the same way that **thlipsis** is used here in Revelation 2:9 is the way we ought to use it throughout Revelation. Even in Revelation 7:14, where it is that we get the term Great Tribulation that is taken by so much of modern Western Christianity as the biblical name for a precise period of time or a specifically named event that is not what is meant. Indeed we find the words "great tribulation" in 7:14, but most Bible translations don't capitalize "great" or "tribulation" because they acknowledge that to do so would turn it into the name of a time period or event. The KJV is good example:

KJV Revelation 7:14 *And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

Great Tribulation is not capitalized because it is not the name of something. And the article "the" is not present in the Greek. So it is NOT out of **THE** great tribulation but rather simply "out of great tribulation". That is, out of great pressure or great distress. So it is quite the misnomer to speak of **The** Tribulation or **The** Great Tribulation as though they are named events of the future. And this of course has an impact on many of the more popular doctrines of the End Times. We'll discuss this further when we get to those instances in later chapters.

Continuing in verse 9, God says He also sees their poverty; and yet in reality they are rich!

What is being compared and contrasted here is that while the Smyrna Believers may be materially poor, spiritually speaking their faithful trusting means they are full of abundance. The context of the verse seems to indicate that at least part of the reason they are materially poor is because of their faith in Jesus Christ. So the pressures they faced aren't at all like the minimal, though mounting, pressures modern Western Christians face today whereby our main afflictions might amount to losing a few friends, or some family members regarding us as "holier than thou" types who are no longer invited to gatherings because we're wet blankets. The Believers of Smyrna didn't have legal protections like we have in the West; they could lose their jobs, people might not buy their goods, and they could be publically ridiculed and humiliated. So whatever you might be facing today regarding being shunned or ridiculed for your faith is miniscule compared to what many Believers faced during John's day.

Next we get to a very difficult section of verse 9 that says this: ***and I know the insults of those who call themselves Jews but aren't- on the contrary, they are a synagogue of the Adversary.***

Oddly enough, even though nearly all Bible commentators and Pastors would agree that an accepted rule of Bible hermeneutics is that whenever you encounter a word or a phrase in the Scriptures that makes sense in the plain reading of it that is how it should be taken, the opposite happens when interpreting this verse. Instead of taking it plainly (as it makes full sense to do so) commentators employ the use of metaphor and allegory to turn the obvious meaning on its head. Why? In order to make it fit with long established doctrines that are based on an anti-Jewish mindset. The verse speaks of those who call themselves Jews, but aren't. Plain enough. And yet nearly all Bible commentators take it to mean Jews who actually ARE Jews, but they are Jews who come to Judaize, which somehow means they aren't Jews any longer in God's mind. That is, if Jews Judaize then Bible commentators assume God disqualifies them as Jews. Nowhere is such a thing found in the New Testament. Nowhere is a Jew divested of his Jewishness by God or by other Jews because of some belief or action he has taken unless that Jew has personally renounced his own Jewishness. So not only is it disingenuous to say that this can only be referring to Judaizing Jews, but it also avoids the obvious: this is speaking about gentiles who come claiming to be Jews. This is not very hard to figure out because all humans are either a Jew or a gentile; there is no 3rd option. If, as God says, these folks call themselves Jews but aren't, that only leaves one other choice; they are gentiles.

But why would gentiles come to the Smyrna congregation saying they are Jews? Because Judaism, contrary to the imagination, was quite a popular religion in the 1st century A.D. Many gentiles converted to Judaism but, especially in the Diaspora, they practiced their own version of the Jewish religion. Yet just as we see today in our time, many gentiles believe that because they have a great affinity towards the Jewish people, or practice many of their Traditions, or even attend a Jewish synagogue, they now also go so far as to hold themselves up as Jews. And it can surprise gentiles of this ilk when true Jews figure out that these gentiles are not actual Jews and sometimes they are shunned as a result.

This verse concludes with: "***they are a synagogue of the Adversary***". Clearly these gentiles claiming to be Jews (and in this context, claiming to be Jewish Believers in Christ) were phony

on several levels and God denounces them calling them a synagogue of Satan. Since **satan** is a Hebrew word that means adversary, the idea is that these fake Jews are being led by evil even if they think otherwise. But let's also address the issue of the use of the word "synagogue" here. Indeed we find the Greek word **sunagoge** used here, which can mean assembly (just as **ekklesia** does), but without doubt in this context of referring to a Jewish religious assembly it means synagogue just as we think of it. God is not denouncing the institution of the synagogue; rather since the Believers at Smyrna meet as a synagogue (led by Jews), then it is a play on words to accuse the false Jews as being a false synagogue: a synagogue not of God but of the Adversary.

In verse 10 comes a warning of coming persecution. Now pay attention to this: the belief today by many Christians is that we will not suffer persecution in the End Times but rather will be whisked away in an event labeled The Rapture, and avoid it. Yet here we have a group of Believers in Smyrna who receive nothing but positive marks from God, and still He informs them that they WILL go through persecution and not escape it. Why would we believe that modern followers of Christ will not experience the same?

God tells the Believers in Smyrna that they will be thrown in prison and put to the test. The test likely is referring to what happens after they're imprisoned. In the Roman era, prison was not a place where people were sent to serve out a sentence. You didn't steal and so went to prison for a year, for example. Rather, prison was where the accused was sent to await his trial. Or, if after a trial the prisoner was found guilty and sentenced to death, then prison was where he awaited his execution. So going to prison was a frightening thing and a person could languish in prison for a very long time simply waiting for his trial to occur. Indeed, for anyone it would be a test; for a Believer who apparently would have trumped up charges brought against him by folks who used those charges to harass him for no other reason than bigotry against his faith, it was all the harder to stay true to that faith. God says that the Smyrna Believers will face this oppression for 10 days. It is very difficult to ascertain exactly what this time period meant. No doubt it symbolizes something, but what? Biblically 10 represents wholeness, fullness, or a completed cycle. Some say it simply means a short time. Others claim there were 10 identifiable periods of persecution upon Believers starting with Nero in 64-65 A.D. and going up to Diocletian in 312 A.D. If we take the 10 days as meaning wholeness or a completed cycle, then it probably means something like until the time allotted for this oppression runs its course. While I favor that meaning I can't say that it is certain.

Nonetheless in the face of being thrown into prison God tells the Believers of Smyrna to remain faithful even if it means their death. The context of this is as we just covered: you weren't thrown into Roman prison to serve a sentence; in time there would be a trial and being executed was a real possibility. I want to say something to you that a Bible professor named Charles Feinberg said that made quite an impression on me, and perhaps it will you as well. He said: "In the Old Testament saints were delivered from death, but in the New Testament they triumphed **over** death." Taken as a generality, that is a true statement and something to consider. The only death that Believers are guaranteed to avoid is the so-called "second death"; eternal death. Physical death just as we know it is guaranteed to us just as it is to non-Believers. Thus our hope....a Believer's hope....is not to avoid tribulation and death, but rather our hope is in the Lord. Our hope is to wear an eternal crown of glory. Thus the Lord didn't

give the Smyrna Believers an easy or miraculous way out of the coming persecution; rather it may be that their death was the only way out. But provided they died hanging onto their faith, it was an eternal victory just as Christ's death on the cross was an eternal victory for us all.

The letter to Smyrna ends with the same sort of conditional promise as did the letter to the Ephesians. The promise is that IF the Believers of Smyrna are victorious THEN they will not experience the second death. That is, provided the Believers of Smyrna stay faithful to Christ and don't renounce Him to save their skins, they will not be subject to eternal death. But also as with the promise to the Ephesians, the other side of the promise is that IF the Smyrna Believers do NOT stay faithful unto death, THEN even in the face of prison and oppression, they WILL experience the second death.

One of the best ways to visualize this comes from a favorite movie of mine called the Kingdom of Heaven. It takes place during the time of the Christian Crusades. In one scene Saladin, the great leader of the vast Muslim armies, had surrounded a barricaded Jerusalem that was full of frightened Christians. The situation was hopeless, and death was a near certainty for every man, woman and child hiding behind those thick ancient walls. When a young crusader knight addressed the people of Jerusalem with a call to fight to the death, the priest of Jerusalem told him he was a fool and had a better suggestion. His words were "convert now and repent later". That is, convert to Islam now to save your life and then sometime in the future repent and return to Christianity. God is warning the Believers of Smyrna that no such option is available to them or to anyone....ever. The price for attempting it, according to God, is our eternal life.

Let's move on to letter number 3; the letter to Pergamum.

RE-READ REVELATION 2:12 – 17

The letter begins, as usual, with the divine-message giver not identifying Himself with a name but rather adding to the list of His characteristics from letters 1 and 2. Now He is the one with the sharp double-edged sword. All of these characteristics are repeats of what was described in chapter 1. This is a longer letter than the previous one, and more complex in its message.

Pergamum was located north of Smyrna and was a center of learning and medical science. The library there was actually larger than the one in Alexandria, Egypt for the sheer volume of books. As happens when cities are known as "college towns", there are fine theaters and venues and such places are attractive to those with money. Thus there were numerous royal residences in Pergamum.

The most iconic building of the many fine buildings in Pergamum was the Temple of Aesculapius. There would be found a symbol quite familiar to most us and especially to the world of medicine: the wreathed serpent. Early medicine was as full of superstition and idolatry as it was science. In fact, the early practice of medicine was directly associated with the worship of Satan. It is within this backdrop that the Believers' assembly in Pergamum exists and it provides the context for this letter.

The letter states that God knows where the Believers are, and it is in the place of the Adversary's, or Satan's, Throne. Exactly what Satan's Throne is has adherents to many different viewpoints. One popular view is that it is speaking of the great altar at the Temple of Zeus; and this has been moved to Berlin, Germany. Another view is that this is speaking of Pergamum in general, as it housed many ornate Temples to the gods, and thus the term Satan's Throne is more a nasty epithet than an actual piece of architecture. That is, Satan's Throne just means that Pergamum was as evil as it gets in God's eyes; kind of a latter day Sodom. Another view that seems to me to be more likely, but not certain, is that it is speaking of the Temple of Aesculapius where they co-opted the brazen serpent lifted up on the pole of Exodus fame (from the Torah), paganized it, and worshipped it. To this point there is no hard evidence to prove any of these suggestions. But without doubt God saw Pergamum as wicked beyond compare and so that made life as a Believer terribly difficult and full of temptation. In this difficult circumstance God commends these Believers for holding on to His name.

Holding on to His name is usually, within Christianity, taken to mean that they continued to call themselves Christians. However this is an anachronism; that is, the word Christian didn't exist in this era but modern Christians read it back into the New Testament the same way the word church is read back into it. Remembering that Revelation is given to us in the context of Jewish culture, and that it is a thoroughly Jewish document, and that the human author, John, was a Jew, then we'd be better off looking to what the concept of the word "name" meant to Hebrews. The English word name is attempting to translate the Hebrew word **shem**. And while **shem** indeed can mean a given name like Bob, or Joan, or Betty it more often than not means reputation. Or to more fully define it, **shem** includes characteristics and attributes of a person. Thus when we read that the good Believers of Pergamum held onto God's name, it meant that they kept on behaving in the manner of God's reputation, in order to uphold Him, and didn't begin to also identify with some other god in town to make their lives easier.

The Believers also were quite courageous because they didn't deny the Lord even when a highly regarded member of their congregation named Antipas was killed. God refers to him as "my faithful witness"; thus Antipas clearly died as a martyr. Who he was has thus far been lost to history. However, after encouraging the people, God says He has a few things against them. Ephesus had only one thing against them: lack of love like they had when they first believed. Smyrna had nothing against them. But poor Pergamum is going to get a list of things that need correction. The list begins with some of the congregation members holding on to the teaching of Balaam who set a trap for the Israelites so that they would sin. The specific sins mentioned are eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual sin.

Before we explore exactly what is meant by holding on to the teaching of Balaam, I want to conclude today's lesson by pointing out something important about food and food sacrificed to idols. I will do this for the benefit of those who have not gone through the Torah with us and as a refresher for those who have. Very briefly: when a Jew speaks about food, he doesn't mean it the way a gentile thinks of it. Biblically, food is much more specific than meaning "any edible thing".

The Torah teaches us about two sets of laws concerning diet and food. The first set of laws tells us what potentially edible things for humans are permitted to be used as food by God's

worshippers, and what things are prohibited for us. A second and separate set of laws speaks about how permitted food must be handled; otherwise it becomes ritually contaminated and cannot be consumed. Ritual contamination is called unclean. So permitted and prohibited food is not the same as clean and unclean. Permitted and prohibited speak about what is allowable for food; and then clean and unclean speak about the ritual purity status of the food that is on the permitted list. Clean and unclean do not apply to food that is prohibited, because from the biblical perspective it isn't food.

Therefore when we're dealing with the issue of food sacrificed to idols, it is speaking of two things: produce and meat. Historically, all types of produce are permissible for Jews; but the produce can become ritually unclean if not handled properly. Having it used as a sacrifice to an idol is one of those ways. On the other hand only certain meats are permissible for Jews. Since pork, for instance, is not permissible, then it doesn't matter if it has been sacrificed to an idol or not; it cannot be eaten either way. Thus from the biblical perspective when we read about the meat that cannot be sacrificed to idols and eaten by God worshippers it is referring ONLY to the permissible meats like beef, sheep, and goat. The issue is that although they are the permitted meats, they have been rendered ritually unclean the moment they were offered to pagan idols and thus are no longer fit to be eaten by God worshippers, including Believers, Jew or gentile.

We'll continue with the letter to the Pergamum congregation in our next lesson.