

Beauties of the Truth

A Forum for the Publication of Scriptural Viewpoints
Thought to be Harmonious with God's Plan of the Ages
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Parables of Jeremiah

We generally do not think of parables in the Old Testament, but there are many. Among the major prophets Isaiah has 3 parables, Jeremiah 10, Ezekiel 23 and Daniel 5. Among the minor prophets there are some 14 others. We will consider some of the parables in the book of Jeremiah.

Like Isaiah, Jeremiah prophesied to the two tribe Kingdom of Judah. At this time in the history of Israel the ten tribe Kingdom was not in existence, having earlier been conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians.

Jeremiah's message was couched in appealing, symbolic language, but contained repeated condemnations of the backsliding and sinful nation. He spoke of the captivity as of divine will for the good of the Israelites. They were told to reject all worldly alliances, especially with Egypt. Because of his constant reminder of their sins, Jeremiah's ministry became extremely unpopular, and he was repeatedly persecuted when his message of condemnation was proclaimed.

Of all the Old Testament prophets, Jeremiah seemed to have the hardest lot of persecutions and sufferings and imprisonment. This is specially noticeable in his writing of Lamentations 1:12, 3:1. "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger ... I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath."

Despite his reprimands of the Israelites, Jeremiah was perhaps the most human of all the prophets. He was one with whom most people could identify. He reveals his personal feelings and his struggles more than other prophets. Despite these human tendencies, Jeremiah was courageous and had an impressive reputation for strength. Centuries later, in the New Testament, he was compared with the Lord Jesus. "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets" (Matthew 16:13, 14).

We know more of Jeremiah's personal history than we do of the other prophets. He was called to serve the Lord in his early youth. He was extremely conscious of his youthfulness in view of the enormity of the great task before him. For this reason Jeremiah said he could not speak, which meant he did not possess the eloquence of a speaker (Jeremiah

1:6). Yet speaking was to be his chief task as a prophet to Judah. The best speakers of God are frequently those who are the least gifted with human eloquence, for if that is richly present, there is a tendency to rely upon it, attribute the results to this quality and take the glory to themselves instead of giving it to the Lord. It is those like Jeremiah who are weak and as nothing in their own eyes that the Lord chooses to work for him.

Jeremiah's ministry was both destructive and constructive, "to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10). His message would emphasize both judgment and renewal. Before there could be reconstruction and fruitfulness in Israel there had to be purging to remove the idolatry and sins that kept the Israelites from being the people God intended them to be. It is always easier to criticize and destroy institutions and beliefs than to offer anything constructive as a viable alternative. But not with Jeremiah. He was not only critical of the Jewish establishment, but he always offered a reasonable and fair solution. The context of these verses suggests that the secret of power in Jeremiah's ministry was the Word of God and not his cleverness or ability.

Since many prophecies have a double application, and since this one saw only a partial fulfillment in the destruction in Jeremiah's day, there would be a two-fold fulfillment. (1) The restoration and rebuilding of Israel. (2) The restoration of the world of mankind in the Kingdom after the destruction during the great time of trouble. A third possible application

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could pertain to the nominal systems, and this would occur during this same time of trouble.

The entire series of Jeremiah's parables suggest but one objective — to express sorrow and pathos for his country and for his people, so fallen and miserable because of their sinfulness. Phrase is heaped onto phrase and repetition upon repetition as Jeremiah expressed his affected feelings.

ALMOND ROD

The first parable is found in Jeremiah 1:11, 12. "Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then said the LORD unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it."

The word "almond" in this text is taken from a root word which signifies "to hasten." It is also translated as "to be wakeful." The almond tree blooms very early in the year and the flowers or buds appear before the leaves. This suggests characteristics that resemble those of the fig tree. The early blooming of the almond tree is regarded by the Jews as the harbinger of spring. The mention of almond reminds us of the rod of Aaron that budded, which was an almond rod. Almond rods denote vigilance, and a rod by itself is a symbol of power and authority. A rod also signifies affliction, by which God disciplines his people.

Since a rod is an instrument of punishment, it may be intended here as a symbol of the punishment coming upon Israel which Jeremiah was about to announce. A similar interpretation, but using the meaning of the word here translated "almond tree," suggests God was awake and alert to the evils in Judah and was preparing to send judgments upon them. This thought is taken from the name Jeremiah used for the almond tree which means "the wakeful tree" or "the watcher" or the tree "that hastens to awake." These definitions come from the fact that it awakens out of its winter sleep earlier than other trees. By this parable God, through the prophet, indicated the early execution of his purpose: "I will hasten my word to perform it." The judgments pronounced upon the Israelites were nearing their fulfillment. "And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A basket of summer fruit. Then said the LORD unto me, The end is come upon my people of Israel; I will not again pass by them any more" (Amos 8:2).

SEETHING POT

The second parable is found in Jeremiah 1:13, 14. "And the word of the LORD came unto me the second time, saying, What seest thou? And I said, I see a seething pot; and the face thereof is toward the north. Then the LORD said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land."

According to Ezekiel 24:3, a "seething pot" or a "boiling pot" was an emblem of conflict. A flame upon a pot kept brisk by blowing was an oriental symbol of a raging conflict. Regarding "the face thereof is toward the north," or "from the north," Jeremiah saw a large metal caldron on a great pile of

burning wood, boiling and steaming with its face turned from the north, so as to point to the emptying out of its scalding contents toward the south, toward Judah.

The pot represented the empires of the Chaldeans and Babylonians from the north, pouring forth its multitudes as a thick vapor to overspread the land. Though geographically Babylon was located east of Judah, an invading force would not come directly across the forbidding Arabian desert but would follow the fertile crescent, the Euphrates River route, and thereby enter Judah by way of Syria in the north.

At first God used the gentle chastening of the rod. But this was without effect. Now he resorted to the severe chastisements of the boiling pot. This boiling pot was illustrative of the terrors Israel could expect from the regions north of their land. The parable, in context, is self-explanatory. "For, lo, I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north, saith the LORD; and they shall come, and they shall set every one his throne at the entering of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all the walls thereof round about, and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them touching all their wickedness, who have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands" (Jeremiah 1:15, 16).

These two parables contain lessons pertinent and relevant to us also. Lessons of the sinfulness of sin, and that such actions by Judah would not be tolerated by the Almighty. Lessons that there would be no escape from the judgments and punishments of Jehovah. These lessons in Jeremiah applied not only to natural Israel, but apply in this age to the spirit-begotten and will also apply to mankind during the Millennium. Of all the sins committed there will have to be a recompense, whether that recompense is now or during the Mediatorial reign. All sins committed against the Lord's people during this age, the Gospel Age, will have to be retributed before this age ends. This retribution will come upon the living generations at the close of this age.

MARRED GIRDLE

The third parable, that of the Marred Girdle, is recorded in Jeremiah 13:1-11. "Thus saith the LORD unto me, Go and get thee a linen girdle, and put it upon thy loins, and put it not in water. So I got a girdle according to the word of the LORD, and put it on my loins" (verses 1, 2).

Jeremiah was commanded to act out another parable of God's dealings with his people. This action not only existed in the mind of Jeremiah as a portion of an inward vision, but materialized into an outward or external picture. The opening phrase of verse 1, "Thus saith the LORD unto me," shows the divine method of revelation and teaching of mankind. Note 2 Peter 1:21 as confirming this. "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the holy Spirit." The prophets spoke and wrote as they were moved by the holy Spirit; as they were influenced by the power of God which acted and directed the thinking of those who were chosen to convey his message to Israel. Often, those whom he chose to in-



The Prophet Jeremiah

struct would suffer persecution at the hands of his own people, as the prophets declared the Lord's message. In this instance Jeremiah had to purchase and actually wear this linen girdle until it began to rot and become nearly unbearable to him. He had to wear it on the long journey to the Euphrates River, where he buried it in a rock or most likely in a cave near the river.

In this passage, verse 1, the linen girdle reminds us of the white linen girdle worn by the priests of Israel. White was symbolic of the holy character they were expected to emulate as a "holy people" (Exodus 19:6). The fact that Jeremiah purchased the girdle was a reminder that these peoples had been purchased and redeemed by God to be his typical people. Placing the girdle on his loins showed the closeness between Jehovah and his people (verse 11). The girdle, being an ornamental part of the priestly raiment, was for glory and beauty as indicated in Exodus 28:40. Israel had been chosen to glorify the name of the Lord before all the nations on earth.

As the girdle braced the body of the wearer and increased his strength, so Israel was designated to be as a power of God as they witnessed in his name. The last phrase of verse 1, "put it not in water," is an anomaly, for the priests of old were required to maintain absolute cleanliness both in body and garments, including their linen girdles. Hence there were frequent washings of their garments. But this was not so with Jeremiah's girdle. He was not to wash it.

This exceptional prohibition signified the moral decadence of Israel, who became like this corrupted and filthy garment which was worn constantly next to the skin without being

washed. This garment properly represents Israel. This is shown in verse 11. "As the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the LORD; that they might be unto me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory: but they would not hear." The longer Jeremiah wore this garment, the worse it became. The unwashed girdle signified the absence of the "clean water" of repentance on the part of those peoples.

There is an important significance and lesson in the girdle being hid in a hole in the rock. "Take the girdle that thou hast got, which is upon thy loins, and arise, go to Euphrates, and hide it there in a hole of the rock" (Jeremiah 13:4). Because of their corrupt and unrepentant attitude, Israel would be confined to the rock like fortress prison, which was Babylon. "It came to pass after many days, that the LORD said unto me, Arise, go to Euphrates, and take the girdle from thence, which I commanded thee to hide there" (Jeremiah 3:16).

"After many days" Jeremiah was commanded to return again to the Euphrates River and retrieve the garment. The interval between the burial and retrieval of the garment we believe to be a period of 70 days. This would be an adequate symbol of the 70-year exile, captivity and desolation of the land by the nation of Babylon. Going such a long distance, some 350 miles each way, to bury the garment and to retrieve it, had another significance. It pointed out that the people of the country into which they would be carried away as captives would be a distant place. Jeremiah now found the girdle worthless, or as verse 7 reads, "profitable for nothing." This also represented the state of Judah after the exile, stripped of all their outward greatness and loss of its place among the nations of earth. "Thus saith the LORD, After this manner will I mar the pride of Judah, and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, which refuse to hear my words, which walk in the imagination of their heart, and walk after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, shall even be as this girdle, which is good for nothing" (Jeremiah 13:9, 10).

Let's look at this concept that the "many days" may have been 70 days and represented the 70 years of captivity. 2 Chronicles 36:21, "to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her sabbaths: for as long as she lay desolate she kept sabbath, to fulfil threescore and ten years." Note the expression "to fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah." This refers us back to Jeremiah 25:12, "And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations." There is a similar expression in Jeremiah 29:10.

WINE BOTTLES

The next three parables have to do with pottery, earthen ware clay jars. The first of these, the parable of the wine bottles, is found in Jeremiah 13:12-14. "Therefore thou shalt speak unto them this word; Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Every bottle shall be filled with wine: and they shall



Baruch Writing Jeremiah's Prophecies

say unto thee, Do we not certainly know that every bottle shall be filled with wine? Then shalt thou say unto them, Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will fill all the inhabitants of this land, even the kings that sit upon David's throne, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, with drunkenness. And I will dash them one against another, even the fathers and the sons together, saith the LORD: I will not pity, nor spare, nor have mercy, but destroy them."

Bottles in eastern lands were generally made of animal skins and were called wineskins. Our Lord referred to such an animal skin bottle in his parable in Luke 5:37, 38. This bottle in Jeremiah is one that was made of clay, an earthen vessel or jug. The expression, "Every bottle shall be filled with wine" was a popular proverb and prophets frequently used those proverbs in their messages. The NASB reads, "Every jug is to be filled with wine" (Jeremiah 13:12). It was such a truism that Jeremiah could expect hecklers to respond, "Don't we already know that?" Jeremiah answered them by explaining that the jug in this proverb represented them, the people of Judah, including their rulers.

The significance of this parable is that as wine intoxicates the drinkers, so God's judgments and wrath were to reduce that wayward nation to confusion when the time of destruction would come. They would be "drunken, but not of wine" (Isaiah 29:9). Babylon, similarly, made the nations "drunk" (Revelation 18:3). It dulled their teachings, making them oblivious to the true teachings of the Scriptures and unaware of their internal wickedness.

As a result, all were to be dashed as an earthen vessel on the rock because there had been no mourning or humbling in their attitude toward sin and unrighteousness. This is much like the punishment coming upon Christendom and the nations according to David in Psalm 2:9, "Thou shalt break

them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." All bonds keeping society together would break.

The first World War in Europe, 1914-1918, was not only the beginning of the struggle that would overthrow the nations, but was a prelude to the great time of trouble known as the Battle of Armageddon. This will be the great "earthquake" of Revelation 16:16-18. In this period anarchy will abound and all present day institutions will be broken into pieces and be swept away.

The humiliation later suffered by Judah, and Israel previously, should have resulted in the people giving glory to God. But instead, their guilt was not admitted or confessed.

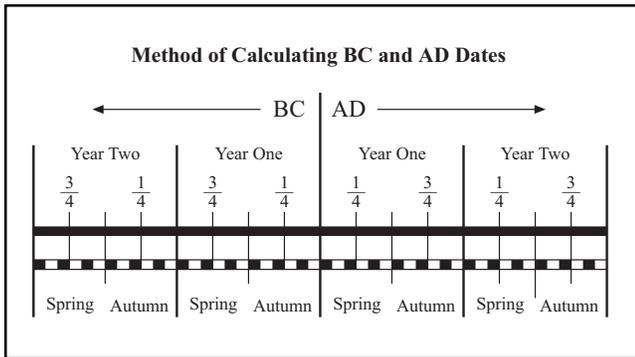
— John Trzyna (to be continued)

Measuring Time

Our use and reference to time have both a general or accommodative framework as well as a level of very precise meaning. The expression, "Arrival will be at 6 pm when the sun sets" may be understood quite differently for a meal invitation, a train schedule or a scientist monitoring an atomic clock. A child may say, "I am five and a half" when by common usage he is regarded as five. An aged man may say, "I have seen ninety-six years," when he means he has passed ninety-five years and is now in his ninety-sixth year. In these matters we understand both the precision and the accommodative language intended in these expressions. We understand their meaning and don't contest their intent. A similar standard of language is found in the expression "the nineteenth century" which implies all the dates beginning with 1800, and "the twentieth century" meaning all dates beginning with 1900.

Furthermore we understand one's age is measured from the month of their birth to the current month and not from the beginning of a calendar year. Therefore if I were born on July 1, 1942, then on April 1, 2002, I can only say I am 59 (otherwise 59 $\frac{3}{4}$). Yet on October 1, 2002, I can say I am 60 years of age (otherwise 60 $\frac{1}{4}$). It is not so simple as subtracting 2002 - 1942 = 60. However, if the beginning and ending months are inclusive, it is perfectly legitimate to do the subtraction as in: 1874 - 539 = 1335, for the blessed prophecy of Daniel 12:12.

In ancient times the marking of events was noted according to the years in the reign of a king, a cycle in the Greek Olympiads or other contemporary events. The reference to years in the Christian era was simply another means of trying to standardize a time line covering many centuries. The means of counting time has a special consideration when some period spans what is commonly called the BC / AD eras. Historically speaking, this is simply a point designated for counting our common form of marking years. For reference purposes, the first and all subsequent years of this era begin with January and end with December. The year just before



this era has the same length and is designated 1 BC. Brother Morton Edgar picks up this subject in *Great Pyramid Passages*, Volume II, Page 34 with the chart above.

Measuring across this line has been illustrated by a carpenter with his rule, who simply measures from one side of a wall and adds the measure from the other side, including fractions. Brother Russell took up this same matter in Volume 2, page 54 with the birth of Jesus. His point is that Jesus was born in the Autumn of 2 BC and was 30 years old in 29 AD. But one cannot simply add $2 + 29 = 30$. As with the carpenter's rule, Jesus was born in the BC era $1\frac{1}{4}$ years + $28\frac{3}{4}$ in the AD era = 30. Actually the main portion of Jesus' first year was in 1 BC and the main portion of his 30th year was in 29 AD. Please see the chart in *Beauties*, volume 12, number 3, August 2001, page 6.

In this regard 2000 years have transpired in the AD era only on December 31, 2000 and $1913\frac{3}{4}$ years transpired on October 1, 1914. It has become customary to simply add the first whole (rounded) year in a BC era and the last year in the AD era together for the sum of a period, even though we recognize the events marking the first year may have begun some months earlier and the corresponding ending point may not reach the end of a calendar year. Such are the reckonings in volumes two and three of *Studies in the Scriptures*. Thus, certain prophecies are counted as: $1813 + 32 = 1845$. $454 + 36 = 490$. $454 + 1846 = 2300$. $4128 + 1872 = 6000$. $626 + 1874 = 2500$. $606 + 1914 = 2520$. However, it can be readily seen that each prophecy did not measure from January 1 until December 31. The first and last year of a period may be given as the year that saw its major portion. However, the event marking the exact beginning of the period may have its inception a few months before or after January of a given year.

Both Brother Russell and Brother Edgar connect the prophecy of Daniel 9:25 as beginning with the extraordinary events recorded in Nehemiah chapters 2-7. Thus Edgar (GPPII, pages 295-306), marks the precision of the 20th year of Artaxerxes in the Autumn of 455 BC, while the first full year of counting the 70 weeks is reckoned from 454. The same prophecy is regarded as ending in the Autumn of 36 AD. Thus: $454\frac{1}{4} + 35\frac{3}{4} = 490$ years of the 70-week prophecy. Yet by common usage and ease of reference 454 BC and 36 AD are the reference points used in *Studies in the Scriptures*.

With similar precision, Edgar notes the Autumn of 607 BC for the inception of the Gentile Times extending to the Autumn of 1914 (GPPII, pages 32, 130, 225). The Hebrew civil New Year is reckoned from the Autumn, and Tower articles frequently reference October in regard to the Jewish calendar. This should cause no concern for a discrepancy in the harvest message as designating 606 as the first year of the period of 2520 years and 1914 as the last, as these marked the whole rounded years beginning and ending of the prophecy. There may even be additional distinction and confirmation seen by looking to the Hebrew reckoning of the 10th of the month Av on either end of the prophecy (Jeremiah 52:12).

So it is with other periods spanning the BC / AD point. For average readers it was sufficient to reference whole years on each end of a time span. When we notice that "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years," it is remarkable that events can be traced so closely to earth-years. Some may read or interpret the events of history differently, but we do not regard the treatises by Pastor Russell as inaccurate or inconsistent. If we let the simplicity, harmony and beauty of the Plan of the Ages surface, we shall be rewarded with the promise of Habakkuk 2:2-3 (NASB). "Record the vision and inscribe it on tablets, that the one who reads it may run. For the vision is yet for the appointed time; hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it. For it will certainly come, it will not delay."

— Jerry Leslie

The Letter to Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17. Truth or Compromise?

Pergamum is the third church of Revelation. It was located about 55 miles from Smyrna, the second church of Revelation. Pergamum was some 15 miles from the Aegean coast, and a mile or two from the Caicus River. Beyond all other cities in Asia Minor, Pergamum was fitted by nature to be a royal city. It was planted at the foot of a magnificent, fortified rocky hill one thousand feet high, dominating the broad valley of the Caicus River. That great and massive rocky hill wore the look of size and strength, giving the city a bearing of both stability and authority.

Pergamum was the center of several distinctive types of pagan religion. These included the popular Asiatic worship of Dionysus and Asclepius, the cultured Greek worship of Zeus and Athena, the worship of Rome and the Emperor, of which Pergamum, as the capital of the Province, was the recognized center. It was also the stronghold of Balaamite and Nicolaitan teachers. It appears from this prevalence of religious superstition that antichrist was more evident in Pergamum than Christ.

CHRIST THE JUDGE AND PERGAMUM'S ENDURANCE

What had the Savior to say to a church oppressed by such influence? We hear the words of Christ the Judge in Revelation 2:12, "These things saith he which hath the sharp sword

with the two edges” (Revelation 1:16, Hebrews 4:12, Isaiah 49:2, Ephesians 6:17).

The sword stands for judgment and the power of life and death. It is linked with the threat that the church was about to hear in Revelation 2:16. It was the symbol of the word of truth which he had spoken and is, “the sword of the spirit” (Ephesians 6:17). Christ’s words cut and penetrate deep; they are as piercing as a sharp sword; and this is the thought represented here.

The Pergamum church is commended for its endurance, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.” It is commended for its faithfulness under pressure, “you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith” (Revelation 2:13).

It is significant that Christ begins his letter to the church at Pergamum with the words “I know where you dwell.” He makes it clear that his intimate knowledge extends not only to the works his people do (as at Ephesus), and to the tribulations they endure (as at Smyrna), but to the environment in which they live (as in Pergamum).

He was well aware of the continuous pressure of a heathen environment. The word “dwell” is a mark of permanent residence; it was not as though they could all migrate elsewhere. They had to dwell in the city where the Lord had found them, and there was no escape from that situation. He was aware that the church was set in a non-Christian environment and that it felt the continuous pressure of pagan neighbors who surrounded them, holding forth different ideas, a different religion, and a different philosophy.

Christ knew that the church felt besieged and beleaguered. The church at Pergamum lived and worshiped and witnessed “where Satan dwells” and “where Satan’s throne is” (Revelation 2:13). The implication is clear. Satan was the source of the errors to which the church was exposed. Pergamum’s multitudinous temples, shrines and alters, its labyrinth of antichristian philosophies, its grant of refuge to antinomian Nicolaitans and Balaamites, all bore eloquent testimony to the dominion of the evil one — Satan. Possibly “Satan’s throne” refers to the massive altar to Zeus Soter, “which seemed to dominate the place from its platform cut in the Acropolis rock,” as Swete observed.

But the chief menace of Satan lay in the claims of the imperial religion. It was through a refusal to take part in this that Antipas had lost his life. It was here that Satan’s authority was most clearly seen. “I know where you dwell” are words full of encouragement to those who have no alternative. This was the city in which Satan had his seat or throne, put forth his power, and held his court. This phrase is thus used to describe “the primacy of Pergamum” as the center of the cult of Caesar-worship. It was the main seat of this cult in the east, just as Rome was in the west (Charles, R.H., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, page 61). This makes it clear that the church had to dwell in a city that was, “the headquarters of resistance to Christ and his Gospel” (Trench, R.C., *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*, page 123).

The Synagogue of Satan in the case of Smyrna represented religious enmity (Revelation 2:9), while the throne of Satan in the case of Pergamum represented political persecution. To confess “Jesus is the Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3) would provoke a certain conflict with those who were bound to hold that Caesar was Lord or God. Thus, here in Pergamum a pitched battle was being fought in which the soldiers were not men but ideas. These were locked together in deadly combat. The issue was not only between good and evil, but also between truth and error.

LESSONS FROM PERGAMUM

The sense of this passage is that to know where men live does much to enable us to judge their character. It is easier to be virtuous and pious in some circumstances than in others and in order to determine how much credit is due to a man for his virtues it is necessary to understand how much he has been called to resist; how many temptations he has encountered, what easily besetting sins he may have, or what allurements may have been presented to his mind to draw him from the path of truth and virtue.

In like manner, in order to judge correctly of those who have embraced error, or to have been led into sin, it is necessary to understand what may have been in their circumstances that led to error and attracted them to sin. What situation in life exposed them to these influences; and what arguments were employed by the learned, the talented, and the plausible advocates of error to lead them astray.

Do we often judge harshly where the Savior would be far less severe in his judgments? Conversely, do we often commend when, in reality, there has been less to commend because the path of truth and virtue has been pursued as the result of circumstances free from temptation?

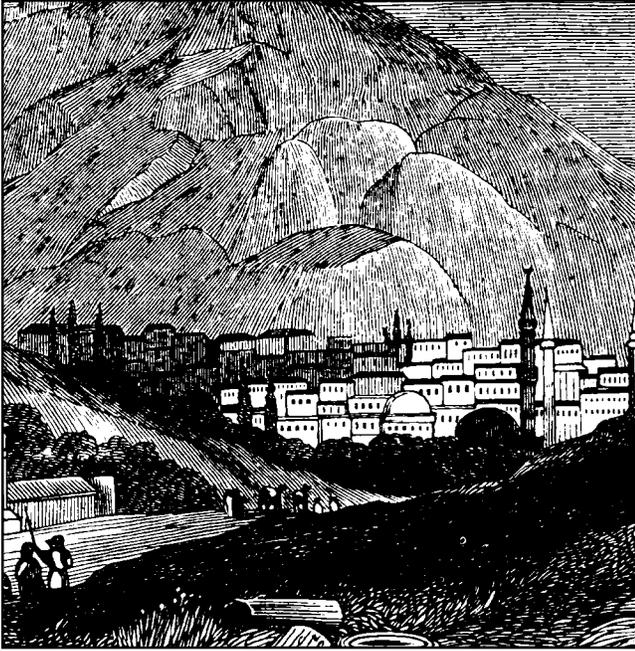
Surely, only the final judgment of Christ will bring these things to light.

FAITHFULNESS UNDER PRESSURE

Christ commends faithfulness under pressure. The exalted Christ is deeply concerned for the preservation and propagation of the truth. This whole letter is devoted to this theme and he commends the church because, “you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith” (Revelation 2:13, RSV).

The church stood its ground despite their hostile environment. There were two great virtues in the life of this church linked to my name and faith. The first points to a fact in the present, and the second to a trial in the past. The phrase “my name” stood for Himself, who He is and what He has done, and to holding fast or clinging to Him, with a tenacity that would not let go. In contrast, “my faith” stood for their faith in Him, in His person and work. The Pergamum Christian grasp of these truths evidently had stood firm even through severe testing.

One of their number, in the heat of the persecution, had been faithful even unto death. His name was “Antipas.” We know nothing about him except what may be gathered here.



View of Pergamos at the base of the rock massif

It has been suggested that Antipas may derive from “anti papa,” *i.e.*, pope. He dared to stand against the enemies of Christ. His courage to stand for the truth cost him his life; and Jesus refers to him affectionately. Those who say that it does not matter what you believe so long as you live a moral life and love all should inwardly digest this epistle to the church at Pergamum and gain the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ on this.

It would not be hard to reconstruct the scene that probably saw the death of Antipas. Known to be a Christian, he was summoned before the Proconsul of the Province. This civil leader was also chief priest of the imperial cult. A bust of the emperor was set on a base (plinth) and sacred fire burned before it. To sacrifice to the “genius” or guiding spirit of Rome and the “divine” emperor was a simple matter. All he had to do was to sprinkle a few grains of incense on the fire and speak the Greek phrase, “Kurios Kaisar,” meaning “Caesar is Lord.” Then he would be released.

But how could Antipas deny Christ’s name and faith? Had he not affirmed his faith in the simple words, “Jesus is Lord,” or in Greek, “Kurios Iesus” (customary at baptism)? Had God not exalted Jesus to his own right hand and set him far above all principalities and power, and every name that is named, and given him a name that is above every other name — the Father excepted — that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father? Was this not true both now and in due time? Had his teachers not assured him that to say “Jesus is Lord” was a sign of the holy Spirit’s inspiration, whereas no man can say “Jesus be cursed” when speaking by the Spirit of God? (Ephesians 1:20, 21, Philippians 2:9-11, 1 Corinthians 12:3).

On these questions Antipas was given grace to stand firm, to hold fast Christ’s name and not deny Christ’s faith. He

would indeed render to Caesar the things that were Caesar’s, — but he must also render to God the things that were God’s. He could not bring himself to give to Caesar the title that belonged to Christ. Christ was his Lord, not Caesar, even if it meant death.

Thus Antipas joined the noble army of “martyrs” as a faithful witness, and sealed his testimony with his blood. The thought of the Greek word “martyr,” literally a “witness,” meaning one who was slain for his unwavering faith, came to have this sense by the mid-second century. Revelation makes it clear that all God’s servants must be willing, should the need arise, for their witness to be sealed with blood; they will triumph by their testimony, and they will not refuse to die (Revelation 12:11, 17:6, 6:9-11).

REBUKE OF PERGAMUM

Nevertheless, the Church was rebuked for their toleration of false doctrine. “You have there some who hold to the teaching of Balaam” (verse 14, Numbers 22-25). “... You also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (verse 15). Pergamum tolerated behavioral compromise, food sacrificed to idols, and the practice of sexual immorality. At this there is a change of voice, and the accent of praise passes into that of solemn rebuke. The phrase “a few things” stands for one thing — in spite of steadfast patience under trial and persecution, they allowed teachers of false doctrine to take root in their midst. The church that withstood all the pressure of the imperial cult faltered before pernicious heresy. They tampered with truth and found ways and means to condone what was evil, for this is what Balaam as the prototype of false teachers pictures. Balaam found he could not curse those whom God chose to bless, but greed made him plot their downfall as a result of his wicked counsel. He taught Balak how to entice Israel into the sins of idolatry and fornication. The daughters of Moab were thrown into their arms so as to bring this about. “Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor” (Numbers 31:8, 16).

Pergamum took food that had been offered to idols, and they practiced fornication. These were the first and last of the four things which were proscribed in the decree to guide Gentile converts (Acts 15:29). Perhaps it was ritual fornication that the text had in view, and this was a vehement rejection of it as a practice that was altogether evil. These false teachers not only had affinities with the past, but with the present as well, and this is made clear in a stark statement of fact. “So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:15). The word “so” means “in like manner,” and it begins a verse that is meant to explain the reference to Balaamites. As Balak had Balaam, so Pergamum had heretics, and the language suggests that the Balaamites were so like the Nicolaitans that the two were virtually identical. Balaam had been a false prophet, a deceiver and a seducer, and his name had become proverbial among the people of Israel. The Nicolaitans were comparable with him because they fostered a return to pagan views of morality. The church had to contend with this sensual

heresy, but the comparison ends at that point, for the church at Ephesus had been adamant in its opposition. “This thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans which I also hate” (Revelation 2:6). The attitude of the church at Pergamum lacked this earnest hatred of sin. The Nicolaitans were tolerated, and this had its roots in the toleration of false teaching. The great primary incentive to full personal holiness lies in our understanding and obedience to truth, and the fundamental conflict in this church was between truth and error. The Nicolaitans were introducing their vile doctrines into the church at Pergamum, suggesting that the liberty with which Christ made them free was a liberty to sin. “Christ has redeemed us from the law” they argued, “therefore we are no longer under law but under grace.” And so their specious villainy continued, “we may continue in sin that God’s grace may continue to abound towards us in forgiveness. We are all human, you know. Christ does not expect too much from us. He knows we are dust.” Christ’s view of this matter is totally different.

CORRECTIVE MEASURES PROPOSED

Concerned that his church shall stand in the truth, and recognizing the source of error, Christ is resolved that the truth shall triumph. “Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth” (Revelation 2:16). The way of conquest is by his word of truth which proceeds from his lips. The only weapon that can slay the forces of error is Christ’s word. It is no wonder that as Christ dictates this letter to John, he designates himself as he “who has the sharp two-edged sword” (Revelation 2:12). He is himself “the word of God” (Revelation 19:13, John 1:1). The prophecy of Isaiah, the servant of the Lord, prefiguring Christ, says of the Lord: “He made my mouth like a sharp sword” (Isaiah 49:2). Paul says the word of God is said to be “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17). In Hebrews it is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). It pricks the conscience and wounds the pride of sinners. It cuts away the camouflage and pierces the defenses. It lays bare the sin and need and kills all falsehood by its deft, sharp thrusts. Falsehood will not be suppressed by the gruesome method of the inquisition, or by the burning of heretics at the stake, or by restrictive state legislation, or even by war. Force of arms cannot conquer ideas. The false ideologies of the world can — and will — be overthrown by the superior ideology and truth of Christ.

This same sword will change its function. The message of truth will become a message of judgment. “... I will come to you soon and war against them (the “some” of verses 14, 15) with the sword of my mouth” (Revelation 2:16). Balaam was killed with the sword (Numbers 31:8, Joshua 13:22), and the Baalamites and Nicolaitans in Pergamum would suffer the same fate unless they repented. The sword of Christ’s truth would devour them.

At Christ’s second advent (presence), a sharp sword issues from his mouth with which to smite the nations, and he

will rule them with a rod of iron, and the rest were slain by the sword that issues from his mouth (Revelation 19:15, 21). If anything is certain about divine judgment in Scripture, it is that God will hold us responsible for that measure of truth that we have heard. “To whom much is revealed, from him will much be required” (Luke 12:48). Did not Jesus say, “If any one hears my sayings and does not keep them, I do not judge him ... he who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day” (John 12:47, 48).

REWARDS FOR OVERCOMERS

Having outlined God’s weapon for the conquest of error, Christ now describes his reward to the conqueror, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him that conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him that receives it” (Revelation 2:17).

Manna represents the living bread, Christ Himself. One peculiarity of the golden pot of manna “hidden” in the Tabernacle, making it both the same and yet different from that supplied to the Israelites in general, was that it was incorruptible. Hence it well illustrates the immortal, incorruptible condition promised to the overcomers of the Church (T122, Exodus 16:33, 34, Hebrews 9:4, John 6:49,50).

In ancient times the Greeks and Romans had a custom of noting and perpetuating friendship by means of a white stone. This stone was divided and each person inscribed his name on the flat surface, after which the parts of the stone were exchanged. Producing either half was sufficient to insure friendly aid. Thus the divided stone became a mark of identification. There is an individual and personal relationship between the Lord and the overcomers, who may be said to receive this mark of identification — the antitypical white stone — now, in this life. This mark is the sealing of the holy Spirit (R5113). The new name signifies a new relationship to Jehovah (Genesis 17:5, 15, 32:28). This relationship — like stone — is lasting and imperishable and it is white. Here “white” signifies an innocent, pure, holy relationship. And so with this promise to the overcomers the letter closes.

Nowhere was it more difficult to stand, lonely and despised, than in Pergamum, where Christianity and Caesarism (or should we say Satan’s representative?) confronted each other face to face. It is possible for the few to be faithful. It is possible when all others have been proved faithless to be found faithful if these faithful are willing to pay the price. Antipas did — and there were others who followed after him. Let us have grace that it will be truth and not compromise that guide us during the hour of trial. We must have a truth-loving spirit; we must have it in our hearts and our lives; we must be prepared to live for it — and, if required, to die for it. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, for he is faithful that promised (Hebrews 10:23). “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

— *David Skein*