

Faithful to death

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[0 : 00] Now, last week we started a series on the seven churches in Roman Asia, the book of Revelation, chapters 1 to 3. And we're going to continue that today, looking at a couple of the churches.

And we're going to begin by reading our passage, which is on page 1028. Page 1028, and we're going to read from chapter 2, verses 8 to 17.

John is writing to these churches in what the Romans called Asia Minor, we call Turkey, probably churches for which he had pastoral responsibility towards the end of his life.

By this time, John would be a very old man, having outlived the other apostles. And this comes to him as a revelation from the risen Lord, whom he meets in chapter 1.

And the risen Lord asks him to address these various churches. So let's read our passage for today. That's Revelation chapter 2, beginning at verse 8. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, The words of the first and the last who died and came to life, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich, and the slander of those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

[1 : 28] Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has a near, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.

Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you where Satan dwells.

But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols, and practice sexual immorality.

[2 : 33] So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore, repent. If not, I will come to you soon, and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

He who has a near, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who 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 that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Amen. May God bless to us that reading of his word. Now let's pray together before we look at the passage. Lord God, as we turn aside for a few moments from the business of the day, from the good things and the bad things, from the routine and ordinary, and from the out of the way and spectacular, whatever we have been concerned with, help us now to focus our hearts and minds on what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

We pray that the risen Lord, who first gave these messages to these churches of long ago, will speak to us now, that the words he spoke then will come to us as living words, from the living word himself, Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Amen. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. That's a phrase that's often been used, and it's linked with another phrase, that when Constantine, some centuries later, made the church legal, some people argue that this did more damage to the church than persecution did.

[4 : 20] In other words, in times of persecution, the church was vibrant, vigorous, faithful to the Lord. Well, when things became easier, then people began to fall away.

Now, there is some truth in that, but it's not entirely true. And as we look at these two churches, Smyrna and Pergamum, I want us to examine this. Now, these churches, Smyrna and Pergamum,

were both powerful and prosperous cities, Smyrna some 40 miles north of Ephesus, and Pergamum some 15 miles inland.

Smyrna was probably founded during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, but we're not certain. But both of them were cities of commerce, cities of education, but also cities marked by a tremendous devotion to the pagan gods.

And that's what lies behind much of what's said here. So as we look at these, let's look at three particular things. First of all, these churches are an example to follow.

Both churches are commended for their endurance under persecution. Verse 9, verse 10 rather, Do not fear what you're about to suffer.

[5 : 39] You may be tested for 10 days. You will have tribulation. Then again in verse 13 in Pergamum, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.

Now, as you read these letters to the seven churches, it's very obvious that not every church is being persecuted. There's no mention of persecution in some of the churches, but in these two churches, it's particularly mentioned.

And it's interesting because if you had lived at that time, if we had been God's people at that time, towards the end of the first century, to some extent it would depend on where you lived, whether you suffered persecution or not.

If you were in Rome itself, there was always the great danger, and indeed some 30 odd years earlier, great persecution under Nero had broken out. And it would depend very much on who the local governor was.

Suppose the local governor was someone whose wife was a Christian. Then he would probably turn a blind eye to missives from Rome, telling him to stamp down on the Christian church.

[6 : 46] On the other hand, you might get another governor who was anxious, a Tory favor with the emperor, who would persecute savagely. So it's a mixed picture, just as it is today. Some of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world are savagely persecuted.

We are not. Many people talk about the kind of political correctness and so on that happens in this country as persecution. I think if we were living, we're not living in a country where our churches are burned down, where we're dragged from our beds into prison and so on.

I think we have to get a sense of proportion about this. But in any case, what is actually happening here? We are told that Pergamum, one writer says, was given to idolatry more than all Asia.

And in both Smyrna and Pergamum, there were shrines to the various pagan gods. Now, you may well think, what has that got to do with us? Where are, where are, there's no shrines to Diana and Asclepius and Apollo and so on in our cities and in our towns.

Let's look at verse 10. Do not fear what you're about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison. That's the source of the persecution then as now.

[8 : 11] So, it's not the local governor. It's not the, it's not the particular state or anything like that. Behind the persecution of God's people is the devil.

And John is going to develop this, particularly in chapters 12 and 13 of his book. The devil rages because he knows his time is short.

And in verse 13, Pergamum is described as the place where Satan's throne is. Where Satan dwells. So, you see, it's not flesh and blood ultimately causes persecution.

They're simply the agents. But flesh and blood, of course, are given the authority to do this. So, when persecution of God's people happens, there is an ultimate source.

It's not the power of the state. It's not the power of the local community. It is Satan himself. Let's see, read chapters 12 and 13 and see, see a bit more of that.

[9 : 11] Well, what does it mean where Satan dwells, where Satan's throne is, and a synagogue of Satan? Now, at the end of the first century, the time addressed in this book, the Roman Empire had grown huge, and indeed almost unwieldy, stretching from Britain to North Africa, and into countries like Iran, and so on, in the east.

And it was increasingly difficult to hold that together. Without modern communications, after all, you can send emails all over the place nowadays. In an ancient empire, you could only send messages, as quick as a horseman could ride.

How were the emperors going to hold this together? Now, Lord Acton in the 19th century says, all power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

And when you're sitting in Rome, with the whole of the world, at least the whole of the world that you know, under your sway, you're going to become increasingly, increasingly conceited, and increasingly feel you're like a god.

And this is what was developing, during the time of the book of Revelation. The Emperor Diocletian established, what was known as the Emperor Cult.

[10:35] Now, this didn't mean you had to give up worshipping the pagan gods. If you're in Ephesus, you could still worship Diana, and so on. But, every citizen, had to go once a year, to the pagan temple, and burn a pinch of incense, and say the words, Caesar is Lord, Caesar, Kurios, the Emperor, is Lord.

And indeed, he called himself, Lord, and God. Now think about that for a moment. No Christian could say those words.

No Christian could say, Caesar, Kurios, because at the very heart of the faith, was the words, Jesus, Kurios, Jesus is Lord. For Christians in Pergamum and Smyrna, Jesus is Lord, was not a happy chorus.

Jesus is Lord, was a declaration of allegiance, saying there's another throne, another kingdom, which is superior. There is a name, which is above every name.

For them, it led to the arena, to the sword, to the lions, and to the fire. And here, Antipas, my faithful witness, the word for witness is martus, which you get the word martyr.

[11:56] It's probably about this time, that this word is beginning to develop, the modern sense of martyr. So, the emperor cult, the sense that there was a loyalty, you had to swear to, that was greater than your loyalty to the Lord.

Now, you notice something else though. This persecution is limited. Verse 10, for 10 days, you will have tribulation. Now, 10 days, it doesn't mean literally 10 days, and apocalyptic numbers, have a particular symbol, and 10 is often used, as a kind of round number, to mean a prolonged, but limited time.

In other words, this is not the last word. Persecution is not the last word. The emperor is not, in fact, Lord. He does not control this.

And, and notice as well, some of the church would survive. Verse 10 also, the devil is about to throw some of you, into prison. But the church would survive.

Now, what about us? I'm as terrified as you, at the thought of persecution. I hate the thought, of, churches being burned down, thugs, bursting into your house, and dragging you from your bed, into prison.

[13:18] I think we've got to get this, in a sense of proportion. I said already, we need to be, we need to have a sense of proportion, in the sense that we are not being persecuted. However, when on the last day, the Lord is not going to say to us, how did you cope with the persecution, that I didn't send you?

The Lord knows perfectly well, the Lord is in charge of this. If the Lord chooses not to send persecution, as he has chosen not to, largely in our western world, over the last hundred and much more years, then the Lord is saying to us, be faithful, persevere in your circumstances, in my circumstances.

The Lord never gives us strength, for hypothetical problems. The Lord never gives us strength, for things that may happen, but don't actually. So let's not get ourselves, into a guilt complex, and imagine we're not Christians at all, because we're not being persecuted.

That, when you think of it, that's just another type of conceit, essentially saying, I want to be a super Christian, I want to face the lions, and the arena, and so on. That is not the point.

The point is, the Lord knows, just exactly, what he's going to bring us. That's the first thing, then, an example to follow. And this really follows, on what I've just said.

[14:40] There is also a warning, to heed. These churches, were praised, for their faithfulness. They were faithful, to death. But, the trouble is, they were falling down, in other respects.

Remember, being a martyr, does not in itself, mean that you are, absolutely, absolutely, super duper. People have been martyrs, for all kinds of wrong causes.

After all, communism, had many martyrs. Other, you know, other, other, unworthy causes, have martyrs. Look at the, look at verse 15, sorry, verse 14.

I have a few things, against you. The church, the church at Carragamon, was being infiltrated, with false teaching, which destroys, the church, from inside.

Persecution, tries to destroy it, from outside. False teaching, tries to destroy it, from the inside. And John uses here, the story of Balaam, in numbers 22 to 24.

[15 : 46] Israel, on its way, to the promised land, had defeated, most of the desert tribes. Then they came up against, the kingdom of Moab. And the king of Moab, Balak, sent Balaam, who tried to, who tried to curse them, but God turns his curses, into blessing.

And so, Balak sends Moabite girls, to seduce them. And what the devil, had failed to do, by intimidation, he succeeded, by flattery, and honey traps, so to speak.

That's what he did. And Nicolaitans, as I said last week, was probably compromising, with paganism. Now, I think we've got to, I think we, as I say, with all these things, we need a sense of proportion.

We are not, we are not, at the moment, being attacked, by persecution. In chapter 13, if you read chapter 13, of Revelation, the devil summons, two beasts, one out of the sea.

The beast he summons, out of the sea, is the persecutor, the persecuting power, of the state. The beast, who rages, who destroys, who kills, who murders, who does everything he can, to destroy people.

[16 : 58] He also summons, a second beast, a beast, who looks like a lamb, but speaks, with his master's voice, speaks like the dragon. This is the beast, of propaganda, and false teaching.

The devil, has not chosen, and the Lord, in his sovereign power, has not chosen, to send the persecuting beast, against the church, in the west. But the devil, has been, brilliantly successful, with this second beast, the beast of propaganda, and false teaching.

The false teaching, that's emptied the churches. The false teaching, that's so often, made the church, into ridicule. I mean, after all, we hear about, the church of Scotland, actually saying, allying itself, with the humanist society, in order to have, religious reflection, in schools.

Now, if that's not, a successful, coup, by the, by Satan's, minister of propaganda, it's hard to imagine, anything, anything that is, the compromise, with paganism.

Interesting, that, now, of course, I'm not saying, I've been a school teacher, myself, I'm not saying, that Christian teachers, ought to go in, and try to convert, their pupils.

[18 : 11] That's not, what I'm saying. What I am saying is, what's now being said, is that, apparently, we've all got to be, atheists together now.

Multi-faith, has come to mean, no faith. I wonder, if humanists are told, they are not allowed, to present, humanist propaganda. Anyway, that's the way, the devil works.

And this is the warning here, and we'll see, even more, in the, in the church, in Thyatira, next week.

What has happened here, is that people, have been faithful, under persecution, but in Pergamum, they have succumbed, to flattery, to deceit, to, the kind of teaching, that weakens the church, and ultimately, destroys it.

And what does, and the Lord says, the Lord says, I will, come, I will, come, and war against you, verse 16, with the sword of my mouth.

Sword of my mouth, is the sword of the spirit, the word of God. And Paul, as he's speaking of fighting, the principalities, and powers, in Ephesians 6, uses this metaphor, the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.

[19 : 26] So you see, these churches, attacked by both the beasts, the hench, the devil's henchmen, persecuting beasts, and the beasts, of propaganda. So there is the example, to follow.

Be faithful to death. There is the warning, to heed. Be alert. And we'll see this even more, next week. And finally, there is a promise, to claim.

The, and let's look at this briefly. Standing against, the first beast, results, in poverty, verse 9, physical deprivation, results in slander, and even death.

Verse 11, the one who conquers, will not be hurt, by the second death. The word, conquers, means the one, who perseveres. It doesn't mean, necessarily, the one that, if you can take it this way, it doesn't mean, that if I'm rejoicing, and singing, all the time, I'm conquering.

It doesn't mean, that at all. It means, if I persevere, even when I'm feeling awful, even when I want to run away. That's what ultimately, conquers means. Keeping on at it, the one, as Jesus says, in Mark 13, the one who perseveres, to the end.

[20 : 43] That's what conquer means. And the, will not be, will not be hurt, by the second death. In other words, there will not be, it will save from judgment, in the world, to come.

But I want you to notice, one very important thing. Sardis, sorry, Smyrna, is clearly, a faithful church. Smyrna is a church, standing firmly, against the beast.

There's no room, for complacency here. The one, who perseveres. Even in, even if you're a member, in the church, in Smyrna, you still need, to persevere.

Because, if you belong, to a church, which the Lord, is blessing, and which is flourishing, that does not mean, necessarily, we are personally, persevering. Awfully easy to, it's awfully easy, to be, pressed into the mold, of the, of the, others around us.

The one, who perseveres. We'll see this, in a week or two's time, the church in Philadelphia. It's interesting, these two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, are given star days, so to speak.

[21 : 54] There is no, could do better, and so on, kind of things. I used to write, in school reports, when I was a teacher. No, there's no, could do better here, but there is, persevere, keep it up.

So, the promise to claim, persevere, and you will, be saved from judgment, in the world to come.

Now, to Pergamum, in verse 17, to the one who conquers, I will give some, of the hidden manna.

The hidden manna, is Christ himself, the living word, the bread of life, come down, from heaven.

Now, in Pergamum, you'll notice, just a few verses, before verse 14, they might eat food, sacrificed to idols, and compromise, with pagan feasts, so they will feast, with the lamb, at the wedding banquet.

Now, the white stone, was, was the stone, given to a distinguished person, which allowed them, freedom of the city. In other words, this is the stone, if you like, this is a sign, that you will be given, the freedom, of the new Jerusalem.

And, a new name, written on the stone, that no one knows, except the one, who receives it. In other words, the special, relationship with Christ, that this individual, will have.

[23 : 13] Now, obviously, all God's people, have a relationship, with him. Each individual, will also have, a special relationship, with him. And that's, that's the wonderful, thing about it. And, and you can see this, later in the book as well.

The city, the redeemed community, and the bride, the perfect, individual intimacy. New Christ himself. So, as we, as we finish today, let's, be inspired, by the example, of Smyrna, and Pergamum, who are faithful to death.

Let's be warned, by what's happening, in Pergamum, even though, they are faithful to death. And let's, let's be, look upwards, and forwards, to the Lord, who will, who will come, and give the only, well done, that matters.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we realize, that, our own lives, are so, are so flawed. Our faith, is fickle.

We are nervous. We are intimidated, often, by the devil's bluster, and seduced, by his, by his, by his, by his, by his, his, blandishments. Help us, Lord, to be faithful.

[24 : 25] Help us to keep on looking, to Jesus, the author, and perfecter, of our faith. And so, help us, to be among those, who persevere, to the end, and who, are received, into your eternal kingdom.

We ask this, in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.