

# *What Christ Thinks of The Church I*

by  
Dr. Manford George Gutzke

## **Christ in the Church**

When we speak of *The Church*, we are thinking of the body of Christ. We're thinking about the total company of all the people that have been saved through the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ and who belong to Him; He is their head and they are the members of His body.

In this study we are considering Christian people as they gather themselves together in groups. They may form local groups, such as in the New Testament in several cases, where we read about "the church that is in their house." In other instances the Scripture speaks about the churches which are in Galatia, in Corinth, and so on. These are *local* congregations. Now usually when we use the word that way we spell it with a small "c" and most of our church life is lived in these congregational relationships. We want to see what the Lord Jesus Christ Himself says to the Church in the context of these local churches, or congregations.

The Christian gospel focus every interest and every hope in Jesus Christ. There's no doubt that every real Christian centers his thought, hope, affection, and his devotion upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The strength of our faith depends largely on what we think of Jesus Christ. And how each one answers the question, "What think ye of Christ?"

Our idea of Christ Jesus comes from the Bible and we should note carefully the various areas in Scripture that reveal Him. For instance, in the Old Testament, much is said about the coming Messiah, the coming Christ. It sets forth in a very clear way the function of the Messiah, the work of Christ. Now when you come to the New Testament, the Gospels show the incarnation. They show the Son of God Himself when He became flesh. He took on human form, what the Bible calls "the body of His humiliation." The One who is Almighty took on the weakness of human flesh in the sense that He could get tired and weary and needed to sleep. He grew thirsty and hungry as well. This is what we see in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are all true in their portrayal as far as they go – and they tell us wonderful things, mind you. The idea that they present the Lord Jesus Christ as just a man is a very poor idea. Yes, He was born as a baby, but He was born of a virgin. He lived as a man, that's true, but He lived without sin. He walked as a man, that's true, but He walked on the water of the sea. He fed the poor, that's true, but He fed five thousand from a few loaves and fishes. He healed the sick as you would think that a good man, a kind man, would want to do, but He healed the sick by His spoken word, as no man could do. He comforted the people that were bereaved, but the way He comforted them was by raising the dead. He died on the cross and died just like a man, but He rose from the dead. Jesus Christ of whom you read about in the Gospels is no ordinary person.

Much that is said today about Jesus Christ is just not true. He is so often spoken of as if He were a human being only. That is not true. He is so often talked about as a great man but only a man. That is not true even to the Gospels. But it is even less true in the Book of the Acts, where you see the Lord Jesus ascended on high with power: the scene is described in the very first chapter. In fact, you see many marvelous events recorded in the Book of The Acts which are not seen in the Gospels. For instance, in His

body, in the first chapter, while He was among His disciples for forty days, He was appearing and disappearing at will. He never did that before the resurrection. He ascended into heaven in full view of them all. He never did anything like that in the days of His flesh here upon earth. Then there was the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost; that had never happened before. Then you have such things as Peter and John being let out of prison by a messenger from God; the like of that never occurred in the Gospels. Then again you have the case of Peter when he was put in prison by Herod and set free by an angel. There are many other things like this that you see in the Book of the Acts, all of which are evidences of the power of the living Lord Jesus Christ now seated at the right hand of God.

Now look at the epistles of the New Testament. They picture all of this, from the function of the Messiah as seen in the Old Testament, to the reality of the incarnation as seen in the Gospels, with His death and His resurrection. They have in mind the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ as reported in the Book of the Acts. The epistles define the believer's present relation to the Lord Jesus Christ as part and parcel of His body. Yet all these events are primarily in this world and on this earth.

It is important that we know He is alive and active now, not on this earth, but in glory, in the presence of God. This is seen in the Book of Revelation. We are going to be thinking about Christ as He is now. We shall see that the popular view of Christ Jesus, as a person, is much too meager. Undoubtedly the weak concept of sin among us, even in the church, is derived from our low view of Christ Jesus.

How can we form an idea of what He is like now? Well, there are some glimpses in the record. For instance, in the Gospels you have a glimpse at the Mount of Transfiguration. Do you understand that event as the pulling aside of the veil so that Peter, James and John could see the real truth? That's what it was, and that's what He is like now.

When Stephen was on trial for his life he lifted up his face toward heaven; and Stephen's face was as the face of an angel when he said, "I see the Son of man . . . standing on the right hand of God." When Paul saw Him on the Damascus road there was a light that was brighter than the noonday sun. It struck Paul blind. That's what the Lord Jesus Christ is like now. In the first chapter of the Book of Revelation, you have John on the Isle of Patmos: he saw Him and fell at His feet as one dead.

We're going to be considering what the Lord Jesus Christ is like now, in this day and time. This poses a problem in communication. How could the Revelation of Christ in glory be made available to us here on earth? This problem is because of the difference between heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ is, and earth, where we are – two vastly different places. Eternity, where Jesus Christ is, and time, where you and I are; infinity, where Jesus Christ is, and space, where you and I live; immortality which Jesus Christ has, and mortality such as ours.

Romans 1:20 sheds light upon this problem: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and godhead . . ." So, as we look at the things which are made, the things of this world, they can be interpreted in such a way that we can understand spiritual, eternal truths from them. What you see all round you in nature, the grass, the flowers, the birds, the whole creation sets forth the pattern of God's natural law. For example, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). That is true in every man's life, and is shown in the sowing and reaping of the wheat in the field. The ritual of the Old Testament in the time of the Levites is a pattern of worship as sinful man comes to a Holy God through the shed blood of an innocent substitute. History, for instance, the recorded history of Israel, is a pattern of God's law, for when He blessed the nation, it prospered and when He withheld His blessing, the nation was defeated. The parables, found all through the Bible, are patterns of God's ways with man and nature. When the sower went forth to sow, the seed fell on various kinds of ground and the crops varied accordingly. That's God's way of doing things. When the net was thrown out into the lake it brought in all kinds of fish, both good and bad. The Good Samaritan helped the wounded man because he had compassion upon him, and God was at work through the Good Samaritan!

In addition, the Bible tells of many visions through which God speaks to us by the use of symbols, indicating to us a pattern of God's plan. Reading of a vision is good, but trying to visualize it is confusing, because its seeming reality fades quickly, even as a dream changes and vanishes from memory as the daylight appears. Now God has not left merely to our own imagination the truth about what Christ Jesus is like now, in glory. We can turn to the Book of Revelation, the revelation given to John, and our hearts will be strangely warmed within us in the very first chapter.

I want you to notice the first three verses of this chapter which offer, as it were, an attestation of the truth about to be revealed to us by a vision of Jesus Christ.

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him [John], to show unto his servants." This is for Christians!, "to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass . . . he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw." The Word of God was a part of the testimony of Jesus, who was Himself the Word, and in turn, embraced all things that He saw. "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand." Notice the way that reads. "Blessed is he that readeth . . . and they that hear . . ." – a joint blessing upon both reader and listener. Hearing includes understanding as much as reading does, but the interpretation, the understanding of the words of this prophecy, must come from the Holy Spirit. Let us depend upon Him as we proceed.

"And keep those things which are written . . ." Keep in the sense of perishing, lest you lose them. Keep in the sense of cherishing a very precious thing, " . . . for the time is at hand . . ." The Revelation to John is about to be given, and this will reveal what the Lord Jesus Christ thought of the churches in the world then and today, for the picture of each church can be applied to us today!

The Revelation given to John is largely composed of visions. It opens with a glorious vision of Christ, presenting Him as He is now. There are certain books in the Bible that especially present visions, and all of them were written at a time when the authors were prisoners. For instance, there's the Book of Ezekiel. It is filled with visions when Ezekiel was a prisoner by the river Shebar. The Book of Daniel is filled with visions, and he was, as you know, a captive in the land of Babylon. You'll find them in the Book of Zechariah, to whom was given many visions. Zechariah had come back from Persia and he was preaching in those days in the country of Judah, which was not a free country. The Persians were their overlords, and he was preaching under restricting circumstances.

Now we come to the Book of Revelation, written when John was a political prisoner under the power of Rome. Note for a moment the ascription of praise in verse 5, " . . . Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins . . ." which would definitely indicate that those visions of John can be understood by the believing heart, but cannot be grasped by an unbeliever. They convey a message from God to man, almost as if it were in code, and if you don't know the key to the code you cannot grasp the meaning. We know that the key is belief in Jesus Christ, and enlightenment comes through the indwelling Spirit of God. In this vision the elements are of the earth, but the structure of the message is from heaven. We shall see Christ Jesus in the midst of the churches, glorious in His majesty, and with a message. This is our living, risen Lord, as we shall see Him in verses four to twenty of chapter one.

Verses four and five bring greetings from the Trinity. Note the phrases, " . . . from him which is, and which was, and which is to come . . ." That's the eternal God. "The seven spirits which are before the throne . . ." That's the Holy Spirit. " . . . and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth." As we continue our study of this vision we will see that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the midst of the churches as a living, glorified, holy, mighty Lord, and He is coming to speak to the churches with judgment. This is a salutary insight, and as we consider the fact that we are studying a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ today, no redeemed man or woman could ever be vain or proud in His presence. And equally true, no one need ever be discouraged or down-

hearted in His presence, neither in the Church, which is His body, nor individually in our personal quiet time before our risen Lord.

### **Ephesus – The Loyal Church**

Is loyalty the supreme test of character? We shall be considering this as we come now to the study of Christ's messages to the seven churches, beginning with the church of Ephesus.

In the Book of Revelation we have a description of the Lord as He is now, and we saw in the first chapter a glorious vision of Him. When John saw this vision, he was overwhelmed, and fell at His feet as one dead. But when he was encouraged and strengthened to look again, he saw one like unto the Son of man, walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, which represented the Church. It is very simple to recognize the meaning of what he saw – the living Lord Jesus Christ, moving in the midst of the churches. He appears here as a judge, observing what His people are doing, as He walks in their midst.

We use the word *churches* in the plural because there are many congregations, groups of people, who comprise the one true Church, His Body. Each of these groups of people means something to the Lord Jesus Christ. He moves among these groups of people while they are serving in their capacity as candlesticks. A candlestick gives forth light; so actually the Lord Jesus is moving among the churches at that point where His Church is to bear witness to the world, to be a light unto the world.

As we come to His first message we find it is addressed to the church at Ephesus Rev. 2:1-7. We need to remember that this truth, spoken to the seven churches in Asia so long ago, is actually universal truth, and its lessons are fresh and meaningful to us today! We can be certain that the "seven churches which are in Asia" were chosen to represent the wide Church, not only in Asia Minor, but all over the face of the earth. Actually there were more than seven congregations in Asia Minor. The point is that these seven different congregations exhibited certain characteristics, which are to be found throughout the Church. Doubtless these types that you see here are not absolute. If you find a church here that is faithful, it doesn't mean absolutely faithful. If you find a church here that is liberal, it doesn't mean altogether liberal in every aspect. If you find a church here that is dead it doesn't mean completely without life. But each characteristic indicates a direction, a tendency. Nor are these types what I would call exclusive. It doesn't mean that anyone church couldn't be both liberal and loyal.

These are normal traits among believers, and there are doubtless as many variations as there are believers. It doesn't mean that these are necessarily stereotypes, nor are they permanent, because I don't believe there are any of these conditions that couldn't be changed by diligent obedience to the known will of God. In fact, you will see that in each case the Lord Jesus calls for a change.

However, each of these seven churches is unique, and yet all are alike. Churches are like people, each one has a distinct personality, but all are alike in that they all need the Savior. They all need help, and help is available. They are all challenged to obey, to believe, and to respond.

All that is said here in these two chapters concerning the churches can be applied to individual believers. Anyone of us could have one or several of these traits in our own person, and they should be dealt with according to the teaching of God's Word.

We begin our study with the church at Ephesus, which we could call the loyal church. It is the church with a wonderful record of service. Beginning at Chapter Two, verse one, we read, "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus . . ." Someone will ask at once, what is meant by "the angel of the church of Ephesus?" After much reading and study, I have yet to find a commentary which gives a clear or exact definition of these words. Of one thing we may be sure, God uses His angels as messengers, and we might say here, "The messenger of the church of Ephesus," for this is one function of the angels. The words *doctor* and *nurse* refer to people who minister to your physical needs. In other words, these words don't tell us the appearance or the height of the person, the color of his hair, or anything like that. These words indicate the function performed. And the angel of the church would be "the messenger to the church."

Now let us read on. "These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks." Each message picks up an identifying phrase from Chapter One to identify the Lord Jesus Christ. "Thus saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand . . ." (See 1:16). Verse 19 of Chapter One explains that the seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches, and the seven golden candlesticks are the seven churches. The very fact that He holds the seven stars in His right hand will suggest immediately to you that He maintains and sustains the message in its proclamation, the messengers being held in the hand of the Lord. I would suggest to you that, walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, He moved in the midst of the churches in their witnessing. In other words, if they have any influence on the community around about them, it is because the Lord is concerned with the Word as it is preached by those seven stars and the witness as it is sent forth by the candlesticks.

Verse two begins the actual message itself. "I know thy works." This brings to our minds something very important about the Lord Jesus Christ right now. He knows me! He knows you! I want to bring back to your mind an Old Testament verse that you learned as a child: "Thou God seest me" (Gen. 16:13). The Lord Jesus Christ wants His people to understand that He knows all about us now, even as He knew about the church at Ephesus. The Lord is interested in our performance. "I know thy works." How does He know? He has appraised our conduct and judged it.

Then there follows the record of nine approved activities that these people did and did well. "I know thy works." They were not standing still. Then we read "And thy labor." Now the word *labor* carries more weight than *works*. "Works" refers to what is accomplished, but labor refers to the way in which it is done with agonizing, straining effort. Next " . . . thy patience." This word *patience* carries the meaning of keeping on, steadfastly, persistently, never quitting. He commends them for their loyalty: "And how thou canst not bear them which are evil." These were people who could not stand any compromise, and He approved of that.

Then we read further, "And thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars." Now this is a new and surprising note. Actually, in the early church, when they heard some people claim to be great speakers and teachers of the truth, they examined them. They tried, they tested some who made such claims, but they found out that they were not apostles, but liars. In other words, they exposed the hypocrites. I can imagine that wasn't a very popular activity, but it demonstrated their loyalty. The next phrase, " . . . and hath borne," carries the meaning of persistence under pressure, and it could very well refer to the reaction caused by their disclosure of hypocrisy. If they uncovered and disclosed hypocrisy, you can be sure they got a reaction. There were unpleasant things to face, and they bore these things with patience. They continued steadfastly in the face of opposition and they were persistent in what they were doing.

"And for my namesake hast laboured." Being constant in their concern for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. They gave honor to the Lord Jesus Christ before the world. "And hast not fainted," again showing their steadfast loyalty. When we read that list of those nine Christian characteristics, you can't help but admire this church. It was a strong church!

Now we come to verse four: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee . . ." At once the thought comes to mind, is the Lord going to judge such a strong group? Yes, He is. God is holy, He is just, and in love He must correct this church at Ephesus and correct us today! The messenger said: "Thou hast left thy first love." Your love has cooled off. You're not as earnest and not as sincere as you were, a natural development, but spiritually a very dangerous one, the sin of backsliding. Here was a strong, faithful, loyal church. Have you ever considered how easily loyalty to a church or to a person or to a cause can become mere zeal? And when loyalty becomes merely zeal it can breed pride and fault-finding. Loyalty can actually breed unkindness and bitter criticism of other Christians. Zeal is not enough; it must be tempered with love. Saul was zealous when he persecuted the young Church, before he knew the love of Christ.

Have you ever realized, loyal Christian worker, that you can view your own record of service in the church and Sunday School, and breed a smug complacency? It may grow easy to take the grace of God for granted, if you fail daily to give God the glory for His faithfulness and enabling grace. "God resisteth the proud, but he giveth grace to the humble." He will not continue to favor those who are wrong in His sight, nor condone their wrong doing. He chastens us, in love. This early church, though faithful, good, careful and cautious, fell into this sin of complacency. They became enamored perhaps with themselves and satisfied with their record, so that they forgot to glorify God. And in that they were wrong!

Verse five stresses the need for repentance. "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works." And the lesson holds for us today! Remember what it was like when you started as a Christian? You kept looking to the Lord Jesus and you believed in Him, you worshipped Him, you talked about Him, you praised Him, you had Bible reading and prayer. You were trying to find His will, day by day. You talked to Him in prayer. And you tried to please Him in service. You can regain this close walk with God which you experienced as a young Christian. God has not changed, the love of Jesus has not failed, the Holy Spirit waits patiently for you to resume the habit of daily reading of the Word, and prayer. Repent and return!

"But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Later on in our study we will consider the Nicolaitans. Right now, what I want to point out is this: it is a wholesome and good thing to hate what the Lord hates. Hate is never directed toward an individual, but rather toward the evil deeds of those who do not know and love God.

Our study together of the message to the church at Ephesus has, as we have seen, many pertinent lessons for us today. Sin is always possible for a Christian, but never necessary! A close walk with God, such as we enjoyed when we were "Babes in Christ," will give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to guide us, that our lives may reflect His indwelling presence.

### **Smyrna – The Suffering Church**

Do the righteous suffer? Are faithful servants of Jesus Christ called upon to undergo deep and tragic suffering? As we begin our study of the message to the second of the seven churches (Revelation 2:8-11), one portion stands out: "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty (but thou are rich)." We shall call this "The Suffering Church," and I am sure we shall be blessed and comforted as we perceive the living message for us today.

Again you will notice reference to the description of the Lord Jesus Christ taken from 1:8 "And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; I know thy works." This particular phrase is repeated to each church, and as you hear it, time after time, you can think, deep down in your own heart, that your Lord is actually seeing, noting, evaluating your own personal life as He does the conduct of every one of His people, and as He did with each of the seven churches. We are saved to serve the Lord. He gives us the needed grace, He gives us sufficient strength, He gives us clear guidance for serving Him as we wait on Him in prayer. Then He watches us as we serve.

"I know thy works, and tribulation." Now you'll notice that this word *tribulation* is used for the church at Smyrna. It wasn't used for the church at Ephesus, and it won't be used for the other churches. "I know thy works, and tribulation." Tribulation is not, of course, a trait in itself, but the manner in which tribulation is met strongly signifies the traits or character of the sufferer. Tribulation means trouble. "I know thy trouble." By the way, here is something for us to note as we look at this church: all that some believers seem to do is to have trouble. It is a little hard for some of us more fortunate people to realize this. It is easy in this land of plenty and of freedom to overlook the fact that there are Christian people elsewhere who have no other opportunity to serve the Lord, than to endure and remain faithful under severe personal persecution, to be steadfast to the Lord in their faith and in their testimony under circum-

stances that are really bitter. There are people who have these experiences today. We are not promised skies always blue, but some Christians live under the burden of severe trouble, and are unable to do any more than maintain quiet personal testimony. This was the case with the church at Smyrna. They were surrounded by such a hostile situation and facing such severe and violent persecution that there was no chance for them to do anything more than simply to raise their witness before the world and be faithful under the pressure of such daily persecution.

Now we read on, ". . . and poverty," and then we have a parenthesis, "(but thou art rich)." We can understand that. They had poverty so far as this world is concerned, no money, no property, but they were rich in spiritual things. Some Christian people will find that the way of the Lord does not lead them to earthly riches. Some of God's people are wealthy and have an opportunity to serve the Lord with their means. However, there are many Christian people who have lost their worldly possessions and they have nothing. And it often happens that it is the poor who are rich in faith not always, but often and those of us who know about them know the quality of their faith. Because of our radio program we receive thousands of letters, and many come from poor people who have no money and have had no opportunity in life. I get letters from people who do not have the privilege of going to church, who are surrounded by circumstances that are so uncomfortable and unfavorable that any form of Christian work is denied to them, and yet they are witnessing to the Lord where they are.

"I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan." This involves several words that I think we need to understand. As far as the word *Satan* is concerned, we shall give some consideration to that when we study the message to the church in Pergamos. I would like to say something about those who are named Jews here. We would make a mistake if we thought this referred only to the Jews as a nation, or to the people who are the actual descendants of Abraham. I think what we are actually to understand here is that this represents people who have been brought up in the name and tradition of believers. In the days of the apostles there were people who claimed to be the children of Abraham. They claimed to believe in God, but some of those people opposed the Lord Jesus Christ when He told them that He was going to obey the will of His Father. They claimed that Abraham was their father, and you will remember how the Lord Jesus told them they weren't the children of Abraham, because if they were, they would have followed him. I would suggest when you see the word *Jew*, you can replace it with the name of your own denomination. Then you can say. "I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Presbyterians and are not, but they are actually of the synagogue of Satan," because this refers to individuals who claim to be what they are not. When the Apostle Paul was writing about these things in Romans he said, "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6). Paul was setting forth a principle here, for we have a great many people today who think that they belong to the Baptist church because their parents were Baptist. That won't make them members of the Baptist church or believers in Christ. Of such people we must ask: did you accept the Lord Jesus Christ, and have you made a profession of Him before others? There are those who claim to belong in the group of God's people on the basis of their heredity, or their culture, and these are often the most bitter persecutors of the true Christians; this happened also in the days of Smyrna.

"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer." Take special note of an important fact here: the suffering will be real; personal, and there's no promise that the suffering will end. Such suffering need not be the result of any careless or willful act on the part of the person who is suffering. You can be hurt by the unkindness of other Christians. You can be hurt in your Christian testimony when people are provoked by your faithful witness. Sometimes we hear people say, "It takes two to make a quarrel," but that's not really true. Let me ask you this: do you think the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ could be thought of as a conflict, somewhat of the nature of a quarrel? The religious rulers tried to provoke Him to an angry retort, and were angry when they didn't succeed. There can be suffering brought to bear upon people from the outside, without any fault on the part of the sufferer. If this should happen to you, don't blame yourself.

This is an example of God's providential dealing as you serve Him.

But let us read on together. ". . . behold the devil shall cast some of you into prison that you may be tried." Now here is an interesting thing and while we shall be discussing Satan in a later chapter, I would like to point this out now: the devil can inspire action against you. He himself can't lay hold on you, for he is a spirit. However, he can prompt people to hurt you. The devil can inspire malevolent and malicious action. People can be moved to work for your distress because Satan can put evil thoughts against you in the mind of someone not guarded by the indwelling Spirit. You may make them look bad unintentionally by the way you act, pray, and read the Bible. They may not realize the jealousy, the malice, the bitterness they have toward you simply because you're doing the very thing that they should be doing, and this is the way Satan works.

"Ye shall have tribulation ten days." I already told you that tribulation means trouble. Now I want to tell you that "ten days" is used in a figurative sense. It is like saying you will have trouble for a full period of time, and the next sentence will bring to your mind what that means. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." I want you to notice again that no promise is ever given in this world that you'll ever be relieved. "Be thou faithful unto death." Some of you will never have, in this world, any respite from the pressure and the distress brought on you by unpleasant, disagreeable people. Some believers must suffer all the way, "all ten days." But you will have "a crown of life."

As we have been going along in this study of the suffering church, let us consider the lesson for each one of us. It's not the kind of thing to be glad about, or happy and joyful over, but you can be confident as you rest in the faithfulness of God. You can have an underlying assurance that can actually give you spiritual joy. Suffering is not foreign to Christians. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself suffered and He said the servant was not greater than his Master. If the world hated Him, it will hate you. The apostles themselves suffered, the Apostle Paul especially suffered terribly. James was killed with the sword, and we know that some of the other disciples were martyred.

The early church suffered terribly, just because they were Christians. Philippians 3:8-11 tells how the Apostle Paul spoke of suffering the loss of all things, yet rejoicing that he might be found in Christ Jesus, sharing in the fellowship of His suffering, being made conformable unto His death. In the same connection, Hebrews 11:34-40, read of the suffering on the part of Christians to the glory of God. The death of martyrs always leads into the glory of triumph in Christ.

In church history we read of a man by the name of Polycarp, who was spoken of as the Bishop of Smyrna, one of the famous martyrs in the early church. When the Romans gave him an opportunity of recanting, that is to say, of denying his faith and affirming that it was wrong to believe in Jesus Christ, he gave utterance to these famous words: "Eighty six years have I served Him. He has done only good to me." No wonder the name of Polycarp is a glorious name in the Church!

This message to the church at Smyrna is strong with a bright clear promise of triumph, and as those early Christians experienced martyrdom for their faith, so we today can face persecution and suffering for our blessed Lord and Savior, rejoicing that He "is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8).

### **Pergamos – The Careless Church**

Is tolerance one of the virtues expected of a man or woman who seeks to be Christlike in character and careful and conscientious in walk, bearing a good testimony in the world? Think on these things as we come to Pergamos, and the record is before us in Revelation 2:12-17.

The church in Pergamos presents some sharp and vivid contrasts. As we have seen in the messages to Ephesus and Smyrna, let's never forget that characteristics of these seven churches, good and bad, are embodied in the church of today; and our study is useless if we do not profit spiritually from the joys and triumphs, the sin and suffering of these first-century Christians.



We call the church at Pergamos "The Careless Church," for here we have good Christians who failed to exercise due care, and suffered for this neglect.

Let us begin at verse twelve, with the customary description of the Lord Himself. "To the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges." This again is part of the general description of Christ as seen in the vision which was recorded in the first chapter, but I want you to notice which symbol is used. Look back to verse sixteen of the first chapter, "out of his mouth went a sharp, two edged sword." Connect that with what we find in Hebrews 4:12 where you will read that the Word of God is like a sharp two edged sword, dividing asunder even to the soul and spirit and penetrating the very thoughts and intents of the heart. It is clearly evident that the concept of this symbol, its emphasis, is upon the Word of God as the two edged sword coming from His mouth, a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. The things the Lord Jesus has to say to the church at Pergamos do deal with "the thoughts and intents of the heart." Repeated again is the phrase, "I know thy works." "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest." I have a true picture of the careless, thoughtless aspect of your witness.

As we study church after church, certain trends develop in the messages. Here in Pergamos the cue involves their thinking, their frame of mind. "I know thy works and where thou dwellest." That is to say I know what you desire in your heart, I know what you take pleasure in. The church at Pergamos had grown overconfident. It was self-satisfied with its methods and the depth of its spiritual life. The Lord says, I know how it is with you deep down in your own heart. I know your mental reaction, even where Satan's seat is.

Satan's seat? This is a shock, the devil in the church? The answer is, certainly. He goes anywhere and uses even the church, If he can find entrance, to thwart the purposes of God. Satan can actually appear in heaven, as we read in the book of Job, for he is a powerful created being.

Let us see, what the Scriptures have to tell us about Satan himself. He is indeed powerful. Another thing to keep in mind is that the Bible does not picture him in hell, for he is not now in hell.

The Book of Peter describes him as going about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul says, "For Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light." No, Satan doesn't look like the devil so often painted for our imagination. As a matter of fact he is personable, a suave, appealing individual, else why should people accept his suggestions? Isa 14:12 speaks of him as "Lucifer, son of the morning." He is a cunning person and a deceiver. The Scripture says he is a liar, an accuser of the brethren, a murderer, and that he is not to be trusted, nor believed, nor followed. I John 2:16 speaks of the things that tempt us in the world as "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." These are the avenues along which Satan comes when he is tempting us. He is skillful in trying to reach us through our appetite, our imagination, and our vanity. When the Lord says that the church at Pergamos had its dwelling place, it actually lived where Satan's seat is, it means that this church tolerated the things of Satan. We could say that the church at Pergamos tolerated worldliness. It was a good church . . . but it was worldly.

In the same verse (13) the very next words indicate that it was a faithful church, and a steadfast church: "Thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days where in Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." What a contradiction this is! They were steadfast people, and they were continuing steadfast in their belief in Christ. They maintained their testimony openly and staunchly undaunted even in the face of violent, bitter persecution unto death. And yet in the midst of a good testimony, they tolerated the presence and the activity amongst themselves of subversive elements. Then the Lord goes on to say: "But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication."

From the history of the Old Testament we know the prophet Balaam was hired by Balak, the king

of Moab, to curse Israel. Balaam was apparently a symbol of compromise with the enemies of God. Balaam knew the Word of God and he told the truth so far as God was concerned. But his heart was not in the Word or will of God. Balaam is the classic example of dangerous fellowship which can lead you into tangling alliances. You say to your conscience, what can be dangerous about that? It's just as dangerous as it would be for a healthy child to play around with the child that has the measles. King Balak felt that he could not successfully oppose Israel and so he hired Balaam to help him. Balaam showed him a pathway of deceit, that although he could not openly contend with Israel with any hope of defeating them in battle, Balak might achieve his purpose by a friendly approach, thus misleading them. Here is a classic example of the exploitation of good will as one of Satan's ways of achieving his own ends. Balaam got the Israelites to be friendly with the Moabites. But just as measles are contagious, so is sin! The ways of the Moabites were evil, and inevitably Israel, by their careless compromise, fell into sin.

The danger of evil is as real today as when Balaam lived, and it is a one way street. All the advantages are in favor of evil. Let me illustrate what I mean. You plan to make a cake, using six eggs. Five eggs are good, but unfortunately, the other one is bad. When you have beaten up all six, what about your batter? Of course it will all be bad. And evil companionship quickly contaminates good character.

We hear many suggestions that we should try to help the world. Yes, I agree, but in helping, don't join them. Then how can we help people who are sick in sin? By taking their sickness? No! The only way to help the sick is by staying healthy yourself. A wise law of quarantine forbids you to enter a home where there is smallpox. You're not unkind or unneighborly, you're just wise. Another illustration may help to make this principle clear. As you drive along the highway, you see a car in a muddy ditch. The owner of the car is also down in that muddy ditch, and you come along with your car. There is a slippery hill running down to the edge of the ditch. Now how are you going to help that person? You cannot help him by bringing your car down in the ditch, too. Then there would be two cars in the ditch; matters would be worse than before. The car on the highway, by using a cable or a rope, can help the car in the ditch, but you'll never help the car in the ditch if you take your car down there, too!

What is true with a car in a ditch is true with children with smallpox, and equally true with eggs that are good and bad. I want you to see that it is doubly true spiritually.

The church at Pergamos was trying to get along by compromising with evil. They would not yield under persecution, even though the persecution brought danger and death. They held fast the name of the Lord and did not deny Him. They would not yield under persecution unto death, yet they fell into distress through compromise and this was not the only thing they did. When people begin to tolerate wrong doing, they tolerate more and more.

Thus was it with the church at Pergamos. Verse 15 tells the story: "So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate." Let me say at once that so far as this "doctrine of the Nicolaitans" is concerned, apparently none of us who count ourselves as Bible students can be dogmatic as to what this was, for the meaning seems to be obscure. The important thing is that this church tolerated a doctrine which the Lord hated. "So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate." There are doctrines which the Lord hates. Well, in that connection it would be a marvelous thing if you hated what He hated.

This church tolerated evil teaching and the Lord hated it. We should reflect soberly upon the carelessness of this church at Pergamos. It is possible for a steadfast heart, a faithful person, to tolerate ideas that are hateful to the Lord. We have such an example in the Old Testament time. In 2 Chronicles, Chapter 17 to 20, we find the story of Jehoshaphat. He was the kind of person I would call a "joiner." He joined everything, but was a very remarkable man. Chapter 17 says he did right in the eyes of the Lord, and it is written about him that he had riches and honor in abundance, and it is also written about him that he waxed great exceedingly. As a young man he was prominent for his service for the Lord. Chapter 18 tells us that when he had riches and honor in abundance, he "joined affinity with Ahab," the king of Israel,

who did wickedly and was an evil man. However, Jehoshaphat became friendly with Ahab. This sometimes happens to Christians who are doing well, and who are reaching positions of achievement.

In Chapter 19 we are told that Jehoshaphat met Jehu, the son of Hanani, the prophet, and Jehu stopped him on the open road and said to him, "Shouldest thou help the ungodly and love them that hate the Lord?" This is what the church at Pergamos needed to hear. Should they actually make friends of people who hated the Lord? In Chapter 30 we read: " And after this did Jehoshaphat king of Judah join himself with Ahaziah king of Israel, who did very wickedly." Isn't that strange?

But stop to consider modern Protestantism. Is it not true that in church circles we sometimes have a way of despising, depreciating, and talking in a derogatory way about the people who stand for the truth, the people who urge us to stay true and stay loyal? We criticize them sharply, and then turn right around and show tolerance and kindness toward people who are really opposed to what we stand for. This may apply to all of us!

You know the burden of my message – let us hate what He hates! There are some things the Lord Jesus Christ hates. Let us not be careless in our attitude. Let us rather be zealous to do His will, and make truth and loyalty our watchword. As His final word to this church, the Lord said, "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."

Christian friend, are you "where Satan dwells"? None of us dare be careless about our spiritual health, for Satan is as active today as when he attempted to dwell in the church at Pergamos. By God's grace and in His strength, we can overcome!