

BIBLE CLASS: NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES
Wednesday nights at 7:00PM | September 15

Lesson 10

THE CHURCHES OF SMYRNA AND PERGAMUM

Trying to stand strong

Excerpt from the workbook, “New Testament Churches: Their Strengths and Weaknesses” by Carl McMurray:

Introduction to Smyrna—Revelation 2:8-11

Smyrna was a large, ancient city on the west coast of Asia Minor with a good harbor and located at the head of a major high-way to the interior. Early on, it became a major trading center said to rival Ephesus and Pergamum in Roman times. It had wide paved streets, old coinage, handsome buildings, and schools of science and medicine. It claimed a theatre to seat 20,000 and temples to Zeus and Cybele, as well as to the Caesar Tiberius, making it one of the seats of the sinister Caesar cult which caused so much damage to the church. One of the early church fathers, Polycarp, was martyred here where his grave is still shown. It is said that Jewish sentiment against the Christians here was more intense even than Roman persecution. It was so strong that the Jews even gathered firewood on the Sabbath in order to burn Polycarp.

The city is still a large city in Asia with a population of about a quarter million. Its modern day name is Izmir, a Turkish corruption of the ancient name. The large ancient harbor and stadium are now filled in, but because of its good modern harbor, its climate, and the railroad, the city still prospers. If only the church did like- wise.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. How do you think the culture in Smyrna might have had an influence on the church?
 - a. In what ways do you think culture has changed the church in the past 2000 years?
 - b. Culturally speaking only, is the church here at Laurel Canyon different than say the church over on West Broad or Watkins Road or in Logan Ohio?

2. How could the Christians in Smyrna be rich, and poor, at the same time?
 - a. Would you consider the Church at Laurel Canyon to be monetarily wealthy?
 - b. In what ways have you seen Christians be generous with their money?

3. What were two persecuting powers they had to deal with in Smyrna?
 - a. Can we suffer persecution here?

4. What encouragement is there today for the Christian struggling financially or feeling overcome by various tribulations?

Introduction to Pergamum—Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamum (or Pergamos) was an old city that reached its highest point of power about 190 BC, becoming a capitol of the Roman province in 129 BC. The great library in Pergamum is said to have held 200,000 volumes. Ptolemy Philadelphus, of Egypt, forbade the export of papyrus from Egypt to Pergamum because he was fearful that his library in Alexandria was going to be overshadowed. Because of this a parchment for writing was invented called in the Greek, pergamenos.

It was here that Antipas was martyred (Revelation 2:13), the first Christian to be officially put to death by the Roman state. Tradition says he was burned alive inside a brazen bull.

One of the most renowned structures in the city was the altar to Zeus. It was over four stories high with a base of more than 100 feet square. It was another of the wonders of the ancient world. There were also beautiful temples in town to Zeus, Dionysus, Athena, and Asklepios. In the worship of Zeus he was referred to as “Zeus the Savior.” This would have been particularly offensive to Christians. Likewise, some point out that the figure of the snake and snake handling in the temples of Asklepios in the name of medicine would have been offensive to Christians. Additionally, there were three temples dedicated to Roman emperors and the Caesar cult here. The two edged sword which would remind one of Rome is probably a reference based on the strength of the cult in this area. Corinth had the immorality of Aphrodite’s worship to contend with, Athens lived under the god of the mind, and Thyatira had the economic pressure of its labor guilds, but nowhere was the confrontation between the world and Jesus more frightening than here where Christianity and the Caesar cult came face to face. It is no wonder that the Lord says this is where Satan’s throne was.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

5. In what way might the culture in Pergamum have affected the church there?
 - a. In what ways has the access to information been a good thing and a bad thing for us today?

6. What positive things did the Lord point out about these churches?

7. What were the two main problems in the church at Pergamum?

8. How shall the church deal with tolerance, compromise, and apathy?