

THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES AT SMYRNA AND PERGAMUM

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA – THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Revelation 2:8-11 ~ And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: 9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'

Background

- The town of Smyrna, which means “myrrh,” was located about 35 miles to the north of Ephesus
 - It had a good harbor which contributed to it being chief port for the export trade
 - It was at the end of a major road and was surrounded by rich farmland
 - “In Roman times, Smyrna was considered the most brilliant city [i.e. beautiful] of Asia Minor, successfully rivaling Pergamos and Ephesus. Its streets were wide and paved...It was celebrated for its schools of science and medicine, and for its handsome buildings. Among them was the Homerium, for Smyrna was one of several places which claimed to be the birthplace of the poet. On the slope of Mt. Pagus was a theater which seated 20,000 spectators. In the year 23 AD a temple was built in honor of Tiberius and his mother Julia, and the Golden Street, connecting the temples of Zeus and Cybele, is said to have been the best in any ancient city.”¹
 - Several gods and goddesses were worshipped there including Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Asclepius, and Cybele
 - Smyrna was deeply devoted to the worship of Caesar because of their intense loyalty to Rome
 - Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna and disciple of the apostle John, was martyred there by being burned at the stake in about 156 AD for refusing to worship Caesar
 - Unlike Ephesus, the city of Smyrna is still in existence today, known now as Izmir, one of the largest cities in Turkey
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- “And in Smyrna, there are still Christians. While most of the churches are Catholic, Coptic, Orthodox, or Syriac, there are indications that faithful, Bible-believing Christians still live in Izmir to this day, under fierce persecution at the hands of Muslims. The Lord eventually removed the lampstand from Ephesus, but there is still light in Smyrna.”²

¹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 4, 2818.

² John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, 76.

- It is unclear when the church here was founded as Acts doesn't tell us but likely it started during Paul's ministry in Ephesus when "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10).

Commendation

- Smyrna was the second church Christ addressed in his letters to the churches and one of only 2 churches which He had no negative things to say (Philadelphia was the other)
- His letter reveals a deep compassion for those who are faithful to the Lord and suffering persecution as a result

Revelation 2:8 ~ And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

- Christ describes himself as the eternal one ("the first and the last"), the one who has always existed in the past and will always exist in the future
- For this reason, he also refers to himself as the One "who was dead and has come to life"
- He is the One who died but has been resurrected (cf. Rev 1:17-18; 22:13)!
- His resurrection proves that God accepted His sacrifice as atonement for sin
- "The church at Smyrna is told that the One who was eternal became incarnate and died, a reminder that even the eternal Son of God willingly became subject to the rejection and persecution of man. Like Christ, the church at Smyrna should anticipate ultimate victory. Even as the grave could not hold Christ, and He is now described as the One who 'lives,' symbolizing His triumph over death, rejection, and mistrial, so they too could anticipate their ultimate victory."³
- This description of Christ would have been a great encouragement to the beleaguered church at Smyrna, knowing that the Lord Himself had suffered far worse than what they were experiencing
- This is what comforts us in the midst of our affliction as well today, knowing that, with the Lord at our side, we can face any threat against us
- (See the variety of ways Christ is gloriously described in each of these letters to the churches)

Revelation 2:9 ~ I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

- Smyrna was a difficult place to be a Christian for a number of reasons:
 1. The city's deep devotion to Rome and strong emperor-worship made a failure to worship Caesar a capital offense
 2. Paganism was rife in Smyrna with temples to numerous gods and rituals of all kinds – this made believers in Smyrna out of sync with the world
 3. They were "poor" (i.e. abject poverty) in that they barely had the basic necessities to eek out an existence likely due to the persecution...but they were rich spiritually – contrast this with the Laodiceans who were rich in material possessions but spiritually bankrupt (Rev 3:17)
 4. The Jewish community in Smyrna hated Christians such that Christ called them "a synagogue of Satan" – they took their bitter resentment of Christ out on anyone who worshipped Him. The apostate Jewish leaders did this repeatedly in order to stifle the progress of the gospel (cf. Acts 4:18; 5:17-18; 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5-6, 19; 17:5). Their entire religious system was as bankrupt as that of the pagan gods, demonstrating that even though they "say they are Jews" they are not (cf. Romans 2:28-29).
- This all contributed to their "tribulation" which Christ commended them for

³ John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 60.

Caution

Revelation 2:10 ~ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

- Christ exhorted them to not “fear what you are about to suffer” and also about more persecution to come (“the devil is about to cast some of you into prison...”)
- We don’t know exactly how those warnings were fulfilled or what happened in the “tribulation for ten days”
- Various interpretations of the “ten days:”
 - They may represent the church in the second and third centuries (coinciding with the view that the 7 churches correspond to 7 epochs of church history)
 - They refer to ten specific periods of persecution in that era: 1) Under Nero (54 AD); 2) Under Domitian (81 AD); 3) Under Trajan (98 AD); 4) Under Hadrian (117 AD); 5) Under Septimius Severus (193 AD); 6) Under Maximin (235 AD); 7) Under Decius (249 AD); 8) Under Valerian (254 AD); 9) Under Aurelian (270 AD); 10) Under Diocletian (284 AD)
 - They refer to ten years of persecution under Diocletian
 - They refer to a limited period of time (see Gen 24:55; Neh 5:18; Jer 42:7; Dan 1:12; Acts 25:6)
 - They refer to a literal 10-day period
- Regardless, it is known that believers in Smyrna faced much opposition and persecution for a number of decades

- Most famously, Polycarp was martyred during this time, described in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (written 150-160 AD)
- “The police and horsemen came...on the Friday with their usual weapons, as if coming out against a robber. That evening, they found him lying down in the upper room of a cottage. He could have escaped but he refused saying, “God’s will be done.” When he heard that they had come, he went down and spoke with them. They were amazed at his age and steadfastness, and some of them said. “Why did we go to so much trouble to capture a man like this?” Immediately he called for food and drink for them, and asked for an hour to pray uninterrupted. They agreed, and he stood and prayed, so full of the grace of God, that he could not stop for two hours. The men were astounded and many of them regretted coming to arrest such a godly and venerable an old man.”
- “When he finished praying... they put him on a donkey, and took him into the city...When the crowd heard that Polycarp had been captured, there was an uproar. The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar...Swear,” urged the Proconsul, “reproach Christ, and I will set you free.”
- “86 years have I served him,” Polycarp declared, “and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”
- “I have wild animals here,” the Proconsul said. “I will throw you to them if you do not repent.”
- “Call them,” Polycarp replied. “It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness.”
- “If you despise the animals, I will have you burned.”
- “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.”
- The soldiers then grabbed him to nail him to a stake, but Polycarp stopped them: "Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails." He prayed aloud, the fire was lit, and his flesh was consumed.”

- As believers, we must expect persecution in this life and be willing to suffer for Christ

Matthew 5:11 ~ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

John 15:18-21 ~ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. 21 But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.

John 16:33 ~ These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.

2 Timothy 3:12 ~ Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

1 Peter 4:12, 16 ~ Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you...16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

- We should never think that persecution is something that is accidental to the Christian life...it's part of it!
- "As church history reveals to us, Satan has continuously waged a relentless, hell-bent assault on the church. The entire world system hates God, His Word, and His true church."⁴
- Yet despite this, we "do not have to fear what we are about to suffer" because it cannot rob us of our eternal blessings in Christ!

Challenge

Revelation 2:10 ~ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. **Be faithful until death**, and I will give you the crown of life.

- Christ urged the believers in Smyrna to "be faithful unto death"
- This was an encouragement to keep persevering in the midst of the persecution, to keep doing what they had already been doing, to bear up under their fierce opposition
- This is both an admonition and a promise...true believers will persevere in their tribulation
- "Scripture is clear: If you are a believer, you *will* persevere in the faith. Not because of any inherent strength in you. You have no such strength in yourself. But God Himself 'is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy' (Jude 24). And He *does* hold His people fast...That means if you are truly a believer, your faith will endure to the end. True faith is proven in the fires of persecution. It survives triumphantly...In that sense, the Lord is not merely promising the believers in Smyrna a reward *for* their perseverance. Perseverance *is* the reward, as it bears unimpeachable witness to the genuineness of their faith."⁵
- We endure it knowing that there is no such thing as meaningless suffering
- The Lord uses trials to refine us and sharpen us for the building of His church

James 1:2-4 ~ Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Romans 5:3-5 ~ And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

⁴ MacArthur, 74.

⁵ Ibid., 83-84. (emphasis original)

- Persecution is good for the church; it doesn't destroy the church; it makes it strong
- For this reason, we persevere in it!

Confidence

Revelation 2:10-11 ~ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, **and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'**

- The letter ends with comforting promises!
- First, believers who remain faithful to the end will receive "the crown of life"
- Smyrna was famous for its athletic games, so this would have reminded Christians of the "wreath crown" given to the best citizens and athletes
- Their persecutors regarded them as the lowest of the low, but soon the Lord will proclaim their victory as they receive life eternal
- Second, though persecution can produce great difficulty in the life of the believer, it cannot cause us to face the second death
- Though we may have to face physical death as a result of persecution, we are exempt from the second death

Revelation 20:12-14 ~ And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

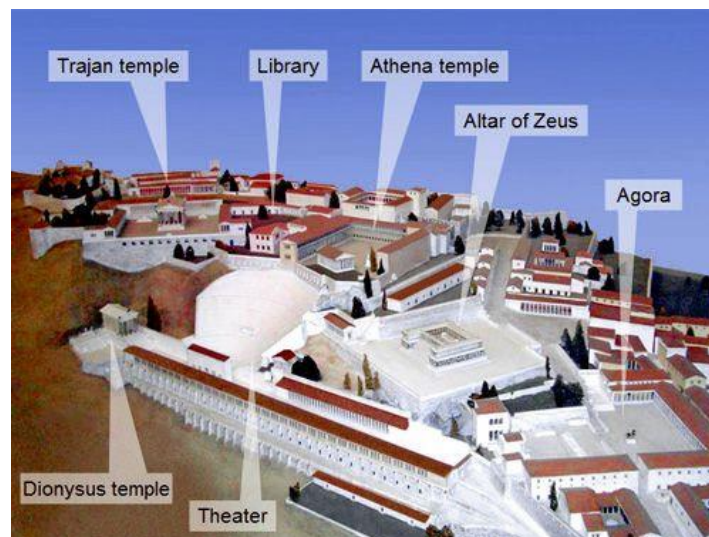
THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM – THE COMPROMISING CHURCH

Revelation 2:12-17 ~ And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: 13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15 So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

Background

- Pergamum or Pergamos (modern Bergama) was a wealthy city and the capital of this Roman province in Asia for at least 250 years
- Its name means "citadel" probably because it was built on a 1,000-foot hill
- Not on a port or a major trade route, it was a center for culture, education, and religion
- The city boasted a 200,000-volume library whose books were written on animal skin parchment, used first in Pergamum (hence the word "parchment" (*pergamena*) which is derived from the name of the town)
- Of the many structures in the town, the most notable was the Altar of Zeus, one of the wonders of the ancient world

- “There were beautiful temples to the four great gods Zeus, Dionysius, Athena, and Asklepios [the god of healing]. To the temple of the latter, invalids from all parts of Asia flocked, and there, while they were sleeping in the court, the god revealed to the priests and physicians by means of dreams the remedies which were necessary to heal their maladies. Thus opportunities of deception were numerous.”⁶
- There was a medical school associated with Asklepios where snakes were allowed to crawl all over the body of a sick person to grant him healing powers
- In addition, temples were built for the worship of Roman emperors Augustus, Trajan, and Septimus Severus



- In the midst of this pagan place a church was planted as a Gospel witness, likely founded during Paul’s ministry in Ephesus as the Gospel spread rapidly from that church throughout Asia (Acts 19:10)

⁶ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 2322.

Commendation

Revelation 2:12 ~ And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this

- Christ describes himself as “the One who has the sharp two-edged sword,” a description given to him earlier (cf. Rev 1:16) and also mentioned later (cf. Rev 19:15, 21)
- This is a reference to the double-edged character of the Word of God (Heb 4:12)
- “Its representation as a double-edged sword indicates on the one hand the sword as the Word of God which separates the ones who are vessels of grace from condemnation with the world, and which by its promises and message of salvation cuts loose the chains of sin and condemnation which bind the helpless sinner. On the other hand, the same Word of God is the means of condemnation and rejection for those who refuse the message of grace. The Word of God is at once the instrument of salvation and the instrument of death.”⁷
- Used here, it likely refers to the fact that Christ was coming in judgment to discipline this church for its worldliness
- But there were some good things happening in that church

Revelation 2:13 ~ ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells

- Christ commended them for 3 virtues:
- First, He recognized where they lived: “where Satan’s throne is...where Satan dwells”
- This is a reference to satanic power in the evil religious character of the city, demonstrated in the multiple temples to Greek gods and a culture of emperor worship
- This made life for believers very difficult as they faced constant persecution and were targets for all those loyal to Rome
- In this sense, Pergamum was “Satan’s throne” where he made his preeminence known through the various methods of pagan idolatry
- Second, Christ commended the church there for “holding fast My name” in spite of their evil environment
- They clung to Christ and never wavered in their commitment to Him
- They remained personally loyal to Christ
- Third, Christ commended the church for not denying “My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you”
- They did not deny the faith, namely the objective body of Christian truth – they held God’s Word fast
- Even the death of Antipas did not deter them from faithfully following Christ
- We don’t know much about Antipas but tradition holds that he was a leader in the church who was roasted to death inside a brass bull during the wave of persecution under Domitian
- The word “witness” is *martus* where we get our word “martyr”
- He was faithful unto death and stood as an example of the loyal believers in Pergamum
- “The church at Pergamos as a whole was commended for standing unwaveringly for Christ even though one of their members had paid the supreme price.”⁸
- We must ask the question: Will we stand true when engulfed by the evil of this present world?
- As we will see, simply possessing sound doctrine is not enough on its own

⁷ John Walvoord, *Revelation*, 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

Condemnation

Revelation 2:14-15 ~ But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15 So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

- Despite their expressions of faithfulness, Christ rebuked the church in Pergamum for two expressions of their compromise with the world
- First, he confronts them for holding “the teaching of Balaam,” a reference to Balaam who was hired by king Balak to curse the children of Israel (Num 22-25) out of fear of what they might do to him and his nation
- Balaam made 3 attempts to curse Israel, but was forced to bless them by the Lord
- Therefore, he came up with another strategy: he would corrupt them by tempting them to sin through intermarriage with Moabite women and, as a result, inciting them to worship idols and engage in immorality (see Num 31:15-16)
- Believers in Pergamum were apparently engaging in similar compromises with the pagan environment around them, intermarrying with pagan unbelievers, committing acts of immorality, and worshipping idols

Numbers 25:1-3 ~ While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. 2 For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, and the LORD was angry against Israel.

Numbers 25:6-9 ~ Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting. 7 When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand, 8 and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body. So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked. 9 Those who died by the plague were 24,000.

- Second, they held “the teaching of the Nicolaitans,” referred to previously in Christ’s words to the church at Ephesus
- Although the Ephesian believers hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, believers in Pergamum had embraced them, possibly engaging in acts of unchecked indulgence and the immorality associated with paganism
- Christ’s words to the church at Pergamum vividly depict the danger of believers succumbing to worldliness and compromise
- While they held the line on doctrine, they failed to pursue holiness
- This is a stern warning about the hazard of blurring the line between worldliness and holiness
- Unfortunately, the church of our day has largely unheeded this warning
- “[T]he church today works incredibly hard to appear as much like the culture as possible. For decades, it has been popular for church leaders to make their services look, sound, and feel exactly like secular gatherings and events. Many churches today are indistinguishable from the concert venues and theaters of the world. They fastidiously imitate the latest styles in fashion and pop-culture trends, desperate to seem relevant and cool.”⁹
- “The result is a church that is sinner-friendly not God-friendly, and certainly not sinner-frightening. It’s a show built in the image of the pagan world, where popular methodology and strategy dominate Scripture doctrine and spiritual power. And as the world grows increasingly hostile to the gospel, the sinner-friendly church must compromise more and more to maintain its attractiveness. Refusing to be an offense to anyone, they emphasize physical emotion, not spiritual worship; affirmation, not conviction; sentimentality, not theology; entertainment, not edification; and frivolity, not solemnity.”¹⁰

⁹ MacArthur, 89.

¹⁰ Ibid., 90.

- This is the danger of the church becoming like the world...of compromising with the spirit of the age...of pragmatism
- Christ's warning to the church at Pergamum is to hate the world rather than cater to it, to avoid it rather than accommodate it
- Christians must remain pure and separate from the defilements of the world at all costs
- "God's design for His redeemed people is complete separation from everything that characterizes the world. We don't do what they do. We don't think the way they think. We don't talk the way they talk. We don't share the world's values. And we certainly don't need to borrow from worldly belief systems."¹¹

2 Corinthians 6:14-17 ~ Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? 15 Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 16 Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. 17 Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you."

James 4:4 ~ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

1 John 2:15-16 ~ Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

Correction

Revelation 2:16 ~ Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

- The only proper response when the world infiltrates the church is to repent!
- So serious is compromise with the world that failure to repent of it will invite Christ's judgment upon His bride ("I will make war against them")
- The church must not tolerate the sins of believers who insist on living like the corrupt culture

Confidence

Revelation 2:17 ~ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

- Christ gives three promises to those who heed his instructions:
- First, he promises "hidden manna" – just as the Israelites in the OT received manna from heaven to sustain them physically in the desert, so too do believers receive "spiritual manna," the benefits and sustenance that come with sustained fellowship with Christ, now and in the future (cf. John 6:48-51)
- Second, he promises "a white stone" – "In the ancient world, victorious athletes received a trophy in the form of a stone with their names inscribed. Not only did it signify their victory, it served as their admission into the great banquet of victors. In terms of eternity, this is the reminder that God's faithful servant will be welcomed into God's lavish provision and blessings in heaven."¹²
- Third, he promises "a new name" – a name of personal affection and honor known only to each person
- All of these promises point to infinite blessing that awaits all those who keep themselves from being stained by the world

¹¹ MacArthur, 101.

¹² Ibid., 102.