

IN THE TRENCHES (Rev. 2:8-17 September 8, 2002)

You may have read in the newspaper this week where former Geelong AFL player Gary Ablett broke several years of media silence to urge fans to stop referring to him by his nickname of “god”.

Ablett said this:

I realise that most people don’t mean any harm by it and it’s just their way of paying me a compliment for my football. But it is quite inappropriate to refer to me, a mere man, as god. It is also disrespectful and dishonouring to God.

He got the name because of his uncanny ability to play football. But no one seriously thinks that Gary Ablett is divine. As far as I am aware there are no Gary Ablett temples and no prayers to Ablett.

He is a man and not a god and no one actually worships him. But over the years, flesh and blood men have actually undergone *apotheosis*. *Apotheosis* is the term used for elevating a man to the pantheon of the gods.

And the pinnacle of *apotheosis* was found in the Roman Empire – and it caused the church to decide – heaven or earth.

Apotheosis really began to take root under Julius Caesar. While he was still alive Caesar had a statue of himself erected on the Capitol – it showed him in his chariot – like Jupiter. He commanded that his image was to be carried alongside that of the god Quirinus. And he had a statue dedicated to him in the temple of Quirinus with the inscription “To the invincible god.”

In 44 BC, just before he was murdered, the Roman senate decreed that he should have his own temple and priest. The temple was to be called “Jupiter Julius.”

This caused a lot of resentment, which contributed to his assassination. At his death his body was cremated in the forum and legend has it that a bright comet appeared in the sky at this very time. This was taken to be sign of Caesar’s ascent to heaven where his soul was received into the number of the immortals.

In 42 BC the Senate officially pronounced Caesar as a god of the Roman state. A temple was built on the site where his body was burned and an official priest was set up to preside over his worship. He was now known as the “Deified Julius” and his heir could now boast of himself as “the son of the Deified.”

While initially steering clear of any thought that he was divine, Caesar’s heir, Augustus, slowly adopted the trappings of godhood.

August began to bring in a practice that was common in the east of the Empire – worshipping a ruler as divine to show your loyalty to that ruler.

Upon his death, Augustus was declared a god like his father and became the “Deified Augustus”. The senate reasoned that after an age of wars and catastrophes Augustus brought peace. He was a “saviour.” There was no way to explain a power so great without appeal to a divine nature residing in the soul of Augustus.

His successor, Tiberius, limited the idea of emperor worship. On his death the Senate declined to elevate him to the pantheon of the gods.

However, the practice of emperor worship came into its own with the elevation to power of Gaius better known as Caligula.

Basically, Caligula was mad – he was stark raving mad.

He marched into the Senate and proclaimed himself a god and demanded he be worshipped. Not only that but he also proclaimed his favourite horse Incitatus both a senator and a god. He demanded his horse have his own priesthood and rituals. He later ordered that the statues of the Olympian gods have their heads removed and be replaced with his image.

You might think that a madman marching into the Senate to declare himself and his horse as gods would result in him being laughed out of the place. But Caligula controlled the army and he was brutal with anyone who opposed him.

No one stood in his way. No senator had the courage to oppose him.

The result was that the practice of calling yourself a god and demanding worship while you were still alive entered the empire and in certain parts of the empire – most notably in Asia Minor – emperor worship flourished.

Emperor worship had its ups and downs depending on who was in power. In the first century though, it was really only Caligula, Nero and Domitian who demanded such worship and persecuted those who refused to give it.

Nero is the emperor parts of the book of Revelation is patterned after.

Domitian was the emperor during the time John wrote Revelation. He commanded that he be addressed by the title “Lord and God” and was responsible for the persecution of those who failed to worship him.

Of particular note for us is that the cult of emperor worship had its roots and its most ardent adherents in the province of Asia Minor. F.F. Bruce said this:

Of all the provinces of the Roman Empire, there was none in which emperor-worship was more thoroughly organised than in Asia.¹

In 193 BC, Smyrna became the first city in Asia to build a temple to the goddess Roma.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Defense of the Gospel* Revised Ed. (England: Inter Varsity Press, 1982) p. 67

The first non-Roman temple built specifically for the worship of the emperors was built in Pergamum in 29 BC. It was dedicated to the “divine Augustus and the goddess Roma.”

In AD 23, eleven cities sought the honour of building a local temple to worship Augustus. Tiberius granted this privilege to Smyrna.

Just before John wrote revelation, in A.D. 89 or 90, Ephesus erected a temple for the worship of the Flavian Emperors. From this time on, Ephesus boasted that it was the “temple keeper” for the emperor.

There is another point of significance associated with emperor worship. It was not just a religious exercise. Loyalty to the empire became bound up with acknowledging that the emperor was a god.

Worshipping Caesar became a test of allegiance and a test of whether you were likely to rebel against imperial Rome.

Initially, Christians were seen as a sect of the Jews who were exempt from emperor worship. But over time it became clear that they were not Jews.

At this point, the power of Rome began to descend on the Christians. Initially it was minor persecution, but in the days of Nero in the mid-60’s, the persecution became brutal. This first persecution was local – it was mainly in and around Rome.

It reached its zenith in 64 AD when a huge fire devastated Rome. Tradition has it that Nero began this fire to divert attention from his failures militarily and fiscally and in governing the empire. And to distract attention he blamed the Jews and Christians for starting the fire.

The historian Tacitus said this:

... large numbers [of Christians] ... were condemned ... Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark ... Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the national interest (Tacitus, Annals, 15:44, trans. Grant, 1959: 354).

This was also a convenient way for the authorities to build up depleted treasury funds, as all property and material possessions of the imprisoned and executed Christians were forfeited to the state.

Many Jews and Christians suffered and were killed under Nero. Most likely both Paul and Peter were martyred under Nero.

After Nero, the persecutions abated for a time. But under Domitian, they flared up and it was not only in and around Rome – it was throughout the empire.

Emperor worship became the focus of the persecution.

In one sense, Christians were model citizens. They obeyed the government, they paid taxes, they kept the laws. But at the point of worshipping the emperor, they had to draw a line. They refused to bow the knee to a man and say he was a god.

And for this, they were seen as disloyal, poor citizens of the empire and treasonous. The result was severe persecution.

In Asia Minor – emperor worship was strong and thus the persecution was strong.

All seven of the cities in Asia Minor to whom John wrote had some degree of emperor worship – but it was stronger in some cities and provoked more severe persecution in some cities.

In Smyrna and Pergamum – the cities we will look at this morning – the cult of emperor worship was strong – and the persecution was also strong.

Christians had already been martyred and others were facing certain death. It was a grave time.

Look with me at 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:

The church in Smyrna is one of only two of which nothing negative is said. Smyrna and Philadelphia have similarities. They are both small churches, poor churches, facing persecution and uncertainty.

These churches contrast with the churches in Ephesus and Laodicea which were large, wealthy and confident.

Smyrna was settled early by the Greeks, it faced successive waves of invasion. It is about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus and has a harbour on the Hermus River, it is fertile, it was a trading centre. It was a commercial city with a large Jewish population.

It was destroyed in the 6th century BC and was rebuilt in 290BC by successors of Alexander the Great.

In one sense then this city had died and then come back to life again.

And now the Christians in the city faced death. So it is understandable that Jesus presents Himself as: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life.

The point is that this is a message of comfort to those in the heat of battle. Those facing death. If they are faithful – if they die true to Christ – then they will rise again.

Christ, the eternal One, the Lord of all history – the One who controls everything – He was at the beginning, He will be at the end – He too faced persecution and He was

killed, BUT He rose again – and He will raise those who are faithful and overcome and they will not be harmed by the second death.

Verse 9:

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich).

Smyrna was not a poor city. It was quite wealthy. But, the Christians were poor.

As part of the persecution, their property was seized. They refused to compromise and it cost them.

But, it only cost them in terms of material goods. As the Lord notes here – while they are poor materially – they are rich spiritually.

Their faithful witness is noted above. Their treasure is laid up in heaven – so while they are materially poor they are wealthy in spiritual terms.

While there is no direct correlation between material wealth and spiritual wealth – the fact is that material wealth can make you love this world and the things of this world. If we have many goods that may be lost if we are faithful – we can be tempted to find ways to compromise.

This church was in a wealthy city and it counted the cost for Christ.

Furthermore:

And [I know] the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

There was a large population of Jews in Smyrna. And they contributed to the persecution of Christians by means of blasphemy – or far better is the translation of the NIV – slander.

The Roman empire had the opportunity to watch the Medio-Persian and Greek empires and refine some of the techniques used by them. One method of keeping the peace that Rome adopted was the god swap.

Rome recognised that the nations were united as a people by the nexus of land, culture and gods.

The Medes and the Persians had found that if you relocate people out of their land – the link with their culture and their gods can be broken and the people are less united and less likely to rebel.

The Romans took this a step further. They insisted that the conquered people worship one of the Roman pantheon of gods – usually the emperor.

As well, the Romans adopted some of the conquered people's gods into their pantheon.

They did this because the conquered people were less likely pray to their own gods for deliverance, because the Romans were praying to those same gods.

And they were less likely to rebel because they were forced to worship the gods of Rome.

The one great exception to all of this was the Jews.

The Jews turned out to be far more obstinate than Rome had bargained for. They steadfastly refused to worship any god but *Yahweh*.

Despite persecution, torture and war – the Jews would not forsake the worship of *Yahweh*.

So Rome made a single exception to the rule of emperor worship. If you were a Jew, you were exempted from worshipping the gods of Rome.

But the Jews were the only people in the entire empire who had such an exemption from offering incense to the Roman emperor.

When Christianity first began to spread, they were seen as a sect of the Jews. The Romans allowed the Jewish exemption to cover Christians.

That is why in Acts, all the early persecution came from Jews – *not* from the Romans. The Romans viewed this as an inter-nicene squabble.

BUT, as the church grew, and as Gentiles were added it became increasingly clear that Christianity was not just a subset of Judaism.

The Jews discovered that if they pointed the finger and said – these Christians aren't Jewish **and** they don't worship Caesar – the Romans would do the persecuting for them.

This is the slander spoken of here. And in this way these Jews contributed to the persecution.

But the Lord says of them – they say they are Jews but they are not, they are a synagogue of Satan.

They are not true Jews. They are not the true descendants of Abraham. They are not the true children of the living God. They are not the one's who inherit the promises of the covenant.

They are a synagogue of Satan.

Verse 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.

Do you sometimes ask the question – where is God?

Where was God on September 11? Where was God when a child was abused or a woman raped? Where was God when Jim Elliot was martyred?

This verse says that some Christians in Smyrna will be killed for their faith.

You could imagine the anguish after the event:

Justin was faithful. He preached Christ. He loved His enemies. He was obedient unto death.

How could God allow this? How could God let such a faithful one die?

But this verse tells us *ahead* of time that this would happen. And it is not done in a resigned way as if it is coming and God could not stop it.

In fact in death – they triumph and overcome.

The Book of Revelation is a book that relentlessly forces us into an eternal perspective not an earthly perspective.

Throughout this book, there is an astonishing interplay between God's sovereignty and the devil's activity.

It is not an interplay like a game of chess – God makes His moves and then the devil makes his moves and then God responds.

The interplay is not between two opponents who are somewhat equally matched. It is a decidedly unfair match. God is sovereign. God is always in control. God *never* relinquishes His sovereignty.

The devil will run his opposition and the result will be a few temporal victories – but God is always sovereign. Everything is in His control. And in fact these seemingly devilish victories actually work to the ultimate good of those who belong to the Lord.

Here in Smyrna we have an insight. The devil orchestrates the persecution, imprisonment and death of the saints – but the fact that God says this will happen and glory awaits the saints shows that He is not taken by surprise and He is not impotent – no it is all part of the divine plan.

Those saints are faithful, they overcome and while they might suffer the first death – the second death – the one that counts can never touch them.

Satan works His evil – God uses it to work all things for good.

The Lamb *always* wins.

Revelation is crystal clear, we live in a theistic universe not a dualistic universe. There is only one ultimate power not two powers who fight for supremacy.

This is very comforting for those who are suffering and about to be martyred – the Lamb wins – those who belong to the Lamb ultimately win.

As well, people can be strengthened against persecution and suffering by knowing about it in advance.

Some in the church will be imprisoned, persecuted and ultimately martyred.

Here they are told that the suffering will last for ten days.

There is a point that we need to understand about apocalyptic literature – it is loaded with symbolism – and numbers play a big part in the symbolism of Revelation.

In particular the numbers three, seven, ten and twelve and multiples of these numbers are prominent throughout the book.

Ten days. In Daniel chapter 1, twice we are told that Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days. They had been tempted to forsake the Law of God and compromise with pagan religion and eat food from the king's table. To eat from the table of the king in that culture was to accept his divinity – to accept that he was a god and to worship him.

Daniel and his friends refused and were tested for ten days and after the ten days they were victorious.

Ten days came to mean a period of testing – whether to worship God alone or whether to compromise and blur the lines of worship. In particular will you worship a man as god.

Smyrna was told – don't compromise – don't give in – be faithful until death – and after this period of testing, you will be an overcomer – and you will receive the crown of life.

The point is clear. There is a choice between the life the world gives and the life the Lord gives. You can deny the faith now and live or you can cling to Christ, lose your life now and live eternally.

This choice recurs again and again in the book. For example in chapters 13 and 14 you have a choice. Receive the mark of the Lamb and face the wrath of the Beast now or receive the mark of the Beast and face the wrath of the Lamb eternally.

Matthew 10:28:

Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

This book only makes sense from an eternal perspective – you are poor but you are rich, you are about to die but you live.

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.

He who is faithful to the end – he who is faithful unto the first death – dying in this life – he will not be hurt by the second death.

The second death is eternal punishment in hell. Revelation 20:14:

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

You overcome by being faithful unto death and not compromising. And then comes victory.

Smyrna was a church that had little to offer from a worldly viewpoint. It was small, poor and being decimated by persecution.

But eternally they were a rock. They were a church that stood in the midst of the battle and declared – we will **not** compromise! We worship the Lamb and Him alone. Take our goods, throw us in prison, shed our blood – we will **not** compromise!

You will only refuse to buckle if you live for eternity. If your treasure is in heaven. If you know this world is a temporary place.

Unless you diligently and relentlessly root out everything in your life that causes you to cling to this world – you may not be faithful unto death. You may love your goods, your liberty or your life more than the glory of the Lamb.

At this point I want to pause and briefly compare three churches. Smyrna is the church that would not compromise.

Laodicea is the church that did nothing but compromise.

But Pergamum is church that refused to compromise on the issue of emperor worship – but did compromise in areas like idolatry.

Look at Revelation 2:12:

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

Pergamum had been the government seat of the ancient Attalus dynasty. In 190 AD the Romans began to take over control of the city which was complete in 133 AD. As the first truly Roman city in the region it was made the political capital of Asia Minor. And in this sense – it is the seat of emperor worship in the province.

To this church, Christ is depicted as bearing a two-edged or double-edged sword. In the Old Testament this refers to something that cuts *both* ways – it wounds **and** heals.

Christ comes in victory for those who are His – those who have refused to compromise. But for those who have compromised – He comes in wrath.

Verse 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.

The church in Pergamum is in the heart of the battle – it is where Satan's throne is.

This terms has been interpreted in various ways:

- In this city there was a temple to Asclepius – the serpent god of healing. Satan is depicted as a serpent. In chapter 12 verse 9 – Satan is called the serpent of old.
- A temple of Zeus was also located there – in the shape of a giant horseshoe.
- But almost certainly this is a reference to the fact that as the political capital of the area – it was the heart of the cult of Caesar-worship.

Despite living in the belly of the Beast, this church held fast Christ's name. They refused to desert the One name that must be worshipped.

And for those who refused to bow the knee the wrath of the state would come. A recent outbreak had resulted in at least one death – the Lord's faithful witness – faithful ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐Antipas.

Antipas was a witness to Christ who was faithful unto death. He refused to bow the knee to Caesar. He was faithful to Christ.

This church knew that emperor worship was wrong. They refused to bow the knee. They refused to worship a man. And for this they receive the praise of Christ.

But, verses 14-15:

But I have a few things against you:

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. So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

In the book of numbers we find Balaam – a prophet. A prophet who loved money. And one day an opportunity arose to make a lot of money.

Balak was a pagan king who saw Israel coming and was concerned that they would come and take over the whole land. So he went to Balaam and offered him money to curse Israel.

And Balaam was interested. He wanted the money so he wanted to do it.

But God warned him – don't go, don't do it. But Balaam kept asking and finally, the Lord said he could go with Balak *but* he could only say what God would tell him to say.

Balak asked for a good curse – and what came out is an oracle of blessing for the Jews.

So Balak ups the ante and offered more money. But Balaam can't curse them.

So what he does to earn his filthy lucre is despicable.

He tells Balak that there is a better way to destroy this people than a curse. He tells Balak to tempt them to compromise. Send in your most beautiful women and your best pagan ceremonies.

Get them to intermarry and adopt a few of your practices. Make them think they can worship God and have a few goodies as well – foreign wives, and food and practices.

Offer them opportunities to worship your gods.

You see – their God is a jealous God – get them involved in this stuff and you won't have to worry about a curse – God will judge them Himself.

And He did. He slew 24,000 of them for this unfaithfulness.

Here is the deceptive, alluring teaching of Balaam. *There are some things of the world that you can have and still be a child of God.*

And this same error was also the error of the Nicolaitians.

In this case – it was eating in pagan temples and □□□□□□□□ - spiritual infidelity.

Here is what is going on. Pergamum was not only a hub of emperor worship – it had temples for the worship of Athena, Asclepius, Dionysos and Zeus.

Much of the life of the city revolved around worship at these temples. Especially eating cultic meals and the temple prostitutes.

In Corinthians, Paul had to write three chapters dealing with this same issue.

After their conversion, some had returned to their old practice of attending the cultic meals and the immorality associated with it. This was a very social thing. It was where people mixed. Some who claimed Christ had slipped back into this practice which involved partaking of food offered to idols and eating it as part of a ritual meal.

This is what those in Pergamum had done.

They said – we know there is only one God – we won't worship another god – but it is OK to mix socially, do some of the things we used to do, to dabble in these areas of life.

Oh no! In 1 Corinthians Paul says that to eat of a cultic meal is to partake of demons. Such is immoral, it is idolatrous and it is sin.

You can't dabble in the world and belong to God.

Verse 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 story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22-24. Then in chapter 25 we have the fruit of Balaam. Intermarriage with Moabites, cultic meals, idolatry. And the Lord struck down 24,000. He came with the sword of judgment.

If you compromise with the world – you will face the wrath of the Lamb. He will destroy churches that are spiritually unfaithful and dabble in the world.

Verse 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.

For those who refuse to partake of the cultic feasts and are faithful – they will receive the hidden manna.

In the days of Balaam – Israel was fed by heavenly manna. It stopped. But God will one day feed His people again on His manna, the hidden manna, at His heavenly banquet.

White stones were used as tickets of admission to public events including feasts. Here it is a ticket of admission to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The stones were often inscribed with the names of the patrons who sponsored the event.

On this stone is a new name which no one knows. This is a name of Christ. He is the patron of the marriage supper.

And this privilege is for those who overcome.

Smyrna and Pergamum were in the trenches of battle.

Smyrna was persecuted – bitterly attacked by Jew and Roman. But she would not compromise.

Pergamum was persecuted – and on the issue of emperor worship she was found faithful. But, she was blind to some false teachings that had entered in. She thought that faithfulness in the area of holding to the divinity of God alone was enough.

She was blind to the seduction of the world. She was blind to the error of compromise at the edges. And for this she must repent.

Brothers and sisters – our society is not one of overt persecution. Nor do we face the threat of being asked to worship men.

BUT, we certainly face the teaching of Balaam. Compromise with the world. The ear-tickling advice that – *There are some things of the world that you can have and still be a child of God.*

And in case you sit there and think that it is unlikely that you will get involved in idolatry – let me remind you that the Scriptures say that greed is idolatry. Anything which satisfies more than Christ is idolatry.

A little immorality or divorce or covetousness or materialism or just plain satisfaction with this world – these are idolatry – these are compromise – these are the teaching that you can have the world and still belong to Christ.

But our Lord is a jealous God. He wants all of us. Possessions, freedom and life.

But He is also a God of infinite grace – He gives all – eternal life, immunity to the second death and entrance to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

I want to be like Smyrna. I want to stand in the midst of the battle and declare – I will **not** compromise! I worship the Lamb and Him alone. I am satisfied in Christ. Take my goods, throw me in prison, shed my blood – I want Christ – I will not compromise!

I want to eat of the hidden manna at the marriage supper of the Lamb.