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The Promises in the Epistles to the Seven Churches.

BY THE REV. MARCUS E. W. JOHNSON, A.K.C.

ARCHBISHOP TRENCH, in his "Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches" (p. 42), has likened the Revelation of St. John the Divine to a precious mosaic, in which are formed many novel and beautiful combinations of costly stones, gathered from the richest mines of the Testaments, both Old and New. Now, in this mosaic there is a Divine pattern, and one which lies deeper than the surface of reference and quotation. It is an "indurated" pattern, one which penetrates and underlies the whole book. The plan appears, for instance, among many other ways, in the rigidly symmetrical arrangement of the epistles themselves. Further marks of the same Divine scheme are to be seen, it is believed, in the correlation of the promises in the epistles to the peculiar circumstances of the various Churches, and also in a scale of ascending degree, which may be traced in the promised rewards themselves. If, however, it is a part of the truest human art to conceal art, much more may this be expected of such a production of Divine wisdom as this mysterious book—more especially since in it so entirely is the ascended Christ its Author and the beloved Apostle more than usually the pen rather than the penman, that its frequent correspondences with the Gospels are to be sought for in the accounts of the Synoptists, and not in that of St. John. The plan, therefore, is doubtless difficult to discover; the correspondences are not always easy to trace. But endeavouring to avoid seeing too much on the one hand and failing to see sufficient on the other, an attempt may be made to indicate what seem with probability to be the broad and main points of contact between the circumstances of those early followers of Christ and the words of encouragement which He "who walked in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" had and has for His faithful ones.

I. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH OF EPHESUS.

"To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (ii. 7).

From the epistles to Pergamum and Thyatira, as well as from Acts xv. 29 and 1 Cor. viii. and x., we know that one of the temptations to which the early Christians were specially exposed was the solicitation to join in the feasts celebrated in idol temples, or to eat of meats which had been offered, those Christians knew or suspected, in sacrifice to idols. At Ephesus, with its world-famed temple, where great Diana was worshipped, such a temptation would surely assail the disciples of Christ. Now, just as exclusion from the first paradise and impossibility of access to the tree of life resulted from a sinful partaking of a dainty pleasing to the flesh, and necessitated and was followed by death, so, on the other hand, he who overcomes the temptation to eat of idol meats is to be rewarded by participation in "the fruit of the tree of immortality" (Ecclus. xix. 19).

The first of these seven promises, then, is a promise merely of immortality to the soul—a promise of admission to the paradise of God.

II. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH OF SMYRNA.

"He that overcometh shall not (οὐ μὴ) be hurt of the second death" (ii. 11).

The condition of the Church of Smyrna was, it is evident from the epistle, one of poverty and tribulation, of "perils among false brethren," and of approaching persecution. Some of the members of that Church, its angel is forewarned, should be cast into prison, and, in prospect of a speedy and violent end, are exhorted to be faithful unto death. The appropriate promise is added, "I will give thee a crown of life"—whether diadem of royalty or wreath of victory makes no difference. "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death." The "second death" is explained in chap. xx. 14 to be "the lake of fire," and indicates some awful, eternal punishment for both body and soul, so that the promise to the faithful of the

Church of Smyrna of being in no wise hurt by this is a promise of the opposite—viz., of immortality to soul and body.

This second promise is, then, a promise, not merely of admission of the soul to paradise, but of the resurrection of the body.

An interesting point of contact between the promise and the later history of the Church of Smyrna is that Polycarp, whether or not the angel of that Church, was undoubtedly one who was influenced by the message and inspirited by its promise. In his long Christian conflict, his steadfast endurance, his right and proper estimate of the fire which could slay the body but not the soul, we see clear evidence of the character of him that overcometh. In the account of his martyrdom, too, it is Jews who are said to have been the most active agents in heaping up the faggots with which he was burned; and yet, as we have in the epistle the "synagogue of Satan," so in the martyrdom the devil is represented as the instigator of the persecution.

III. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH OF PERGAMUM.

"To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it" (ii. 17).

To Pergamum is assigned in the epistle a "bad pre-eminence." The place was in some respects the headquarters of heathendom. There "Satan's throne is." There, too, "where Satan dwelleth," had already suffered martyrdom, as a glorious exception at this early period, the faithful Antipas; persecution, as noted by Eusebius (iv. 15), being always intense at Pergamum. The particular "cultus" in vogue at Pergamum seems to have been that of *Æsculapius*, whose symbol was a serpent, and who was so represented on the coins of Pergamum, and is called by Martial (ix. 17) "Pergameus Deus." But whatever form or forms of heathen worship were there followed, it is evident from ver. 14 that idol feasts, with their gross and degrading accompaniments, were frequented by some of the professed members of the Church. Where the "throne of Satan" was, there

would be a palace of delights such as he provides for men. It is to Christians so situated and so tempted that the promise comes. He who resolutely refused to luxuriate in these forbidden feasts should hereafter eat of the hidden manna. The manna of old was laid up or "hidden" in the ark of the testimony (Exod. xvi. 32-34; cf. Heb. ix. 4); and it appears to have been a current belief with the Jews of St. John's day that the manna had not perished when Jerusalem was laid waste by the Chaldeans. This manna, with the other sacred treasures of the Temple, was reputed to have been carried by the prophet Jeremiah to the heights of Pisgah and to be there preserved, no man knowing of the place, "until the time that God gather His people again together and receive them unto mercy" (see 2 Macc. ii. 7). Joining this to the teaching of our Lord in John vi. concerning the bread of life, it would seem that this portion of the promise will mean the fruition of the sweetness of the Divine presence, and the surpassing, in the full manifestation and enjoyment of the life which is "hid with Christ in God," of all blessedness and joy of which men have ever dreamed. With regard to the "white stone," Archbishop Trench, rigidly excluding all heathen customs from the *fons et origo* of the imagery of the Apocalypse, contends that the stone stands for the Urim and Thummim of the high-priest's breastplate. It has, however, been pointed out by the late Dean Plumtre that there is in the New Testament no single allusion to the Urim and Thummim, and also that the word which is used for "precious stone" in the LXX. and the New Testament is universally λίθος, whereas that here used is ψήφος. Amongst the heathen white stones were used, we know, for various purposes—*e.g.*, to mark a specially fortunate day, to record a vote of acquittal; or, in the case of the *tessera hospitalis*, by a white stone of peculiar form or inscribed with certain characters, to empower him who bore it to claim from a friend a hearty welcome at any distance of time. It is extremely probable, if not actually certain, that such a *tessera* was given to those who were invited to partake of the Temple feast, which consisted, in

part at least, of idol meats. Thus, he who had courageously refused the unholy *tessera* would obtain the holy. The "new name" written on the stone probably denotes a character transformed and perfected, a name the full and true import of which will be known only to him who is, by the white stone, admitted to the palace of the King, just as even now "the heart knoweth his own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with his joy" (Prov. xiv. 10).

It is evident that in this third promise we have a considerable advance upon the previous two, an advance in respect of detail of blessedness—viz., of intimate individual communion with Christ and admission to the citizenship and joys of the heavenly Jerusalem, the everlasting abode of the saints in glory. The third promise is thus one of personal realization.

IV. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH OF THYATIRA.

"And he that overcometh and keepeth My works unto the end, to him will I give power (*ἐξουσία*) over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers, even as I received of My Father. And I will give him the morning star" (ii. 26-28).

In the Church of Thyatira had arisen, as the epistle to that Church discloses, an heretical sect. False doctrine was taught by one who styled herself a "prophetess," and who may have been (the reading is uncertain) the wife of the angel (if we understand that to mean the presiding elder) of that Church. The special danger, then, of the members of the Church of Thyatira was that of being brought into bondage to this false teacher. It is remarkable that the solicitation of the "doctrine" of the woman Jezebel was to the first and the last of the four things from which the council held at Jerusalem (as described in Acts xv.) counselled the brethren of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia to abstain—"things sacrificed to idols . . . blood . . . things strangled . . . and fornication" (Acts xv. 29). "It seemed good," are the words of the formal decision of the

council, "to the Holy Ghost and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (ver. 28). And now the ascended Son of God says to the faithful at Thyatira that He will lay upon them "none other burden," using the very same word (*βάρος*) as had been employed in the message from the council, and meaning, no doubt, no other burden than abstinence from those forbidden things to which His people in Thyatira were specially tempted. He who, thus overcoming and keeping to the end the works of Christ, is not "brought under the power of any," shall himself be given by his Lord authority over the nations. Sharing in the authority of the Son predicted in Ps. ii., the victor shall rule over those who oppose the Lord, whether by false doctrine or false deeds, with a sceptre of iron, breaking them in pieces, having preserved his own integrity. Nor is this all. "I will give Him the morning star." This, from Rev. xxii. 16, is evidently the Lord Jesus Himself. Authority is not the sole prerogative of kings and rulers, but also enlightenment, benevolence, and love. He who overcomes and keeps himself from wicked works shall not only crush the enemies of God with the rigour of his rule, but bless His people with the mildness of his sway. An interesting point of contact occurs between this promise and the parables of the Talents and the Pounds, in both of which each of the faithful servants is rewarded by being made "ruler over many things," and given "authority over . . . cities." Some have seen in this gift of the "morning star" the symbol of the glorious nature of the resurrection body with which, resembling the glory of our Lord's transfiguration, those who turn many to righteousness "shall shine as the stars for ever and ever" (Dan. xii. 3). Whether this be so or not, we have in this promise a further ascent in the scale of reward in the hint which the promise gives of the employments of eternity and the glorious pre-eminence to be assigned to him that overcometh.

This is the promise of commission or domination.

V. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH OF SARDIS.

“He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment, and I will not (οὐ μὴ) blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (iii. 5).

No one of the seven promises is fuller or richer than this to the Church of Sardis, and in none is there a clearer or more encouraging correspondence between the special circumstances of the members of that Church and the predicted and promised reward. At Sardis the worship of the goddess Cybele, with its degrading and defiling rites—hardly less foul than those belonging to the worship of Dionysos and Aphrodite—appears to have been the dominant form of idolatry. Yet “even in Sardis”—a note of the exceptional depth of iniquity there reached—some had not defiled their garments, or polluted themselves by their outward walk and conduct. Any such thus overcoming and persevering to the end shall have the answering blessing of “walking with the Lord in white,” of being “clothed in white raiment”—announcements symbolical of purity and progress, of life and liberty, of beauty and blessedness. Again, the angel of the Church of Sardis has, whether individually or representatively, a *name* that he liveth, and is dead. Yet he had even in Sardis a few *names* which have preserved themselves from pollution. The *name* of any such faithful ones, well known to the Lord and Shepherd of souls who knows His sheep (John x. 14) and calleth His own sheep by *name* (John x. 3), that Lord will in no wise blot out of the book of life, but will “confess his *name* before His Father and before His angels.”

The fifth promise thus rises from personal, internal realization to public recognition and confession by the Lord.

VI. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA.

“Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go no more out; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, which is New Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from My God; and I will write upon him My new name” (iii. 12).

This promise is the encouragement not so much to passive endurance as to active accomplishment, not so much to the

conqueror viewed as standing on the defensive as to the warrior striking sturdy strokes for the Captain of his salvation. It is the missionary promise in the seven epistles. The Church at Philadelphia evidently suffered, like the Church of Smyrna, from the presence and efforts of Judaizing teachers. At Philadelphia these were strong and formidable, apparently stronger than the followers of Christ, whose strength is described in the epistle as but "little." But before these last an "open door" of evangelistic enterprise is set by Him that "hath the key of David," and that "openeth and no man shutteth" (ver. 8). This door, in such circumstances, "no man can shut" (*ibid.*). Success, therefore, shall follow if the Lord's own people will believe this and persevere. "I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie . . . to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee" (ver. 9). What the Church of Philadelphia had, then, which it was to hold fast was zeal for "the faith once delivered to the saints." Let them but continue steadfast in their efforts, let them only overcome in their conflict for the truth, and the promised reward shall follow. The faithful warrior shall lay down sword and buckler, and become "a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go no more out." He shall be, that is, everlastingly secure and safe. There shall be no more possibility of defeat: the indefectibility of perseverance shall be reached at last. Having made strenuous use of the "open door," the conquerors shall be shut in by that Lord who is "the Door" (as Jehovah shut Noah in the ark) into that temple and city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, whither enters in no enemy and whence no friend departs. Upon the victor so safely situated shall be written a trinity of names—viz., (1) "the name of My God," probably, "Holiness to the Lord," as upon the plate of gold on the forehead of the Jewish high priest; (2) "the name of the city of My God, which is New Jerusalem," perhaps "Jehovah-Shammah, the Lord is there" (Ezek. xlviii. 35), or possibly, "Jehovah-Tzidkenu, the Lord our Righteousness" (Jer. xxiii. 6, xxxiii. 16); and (3) "My new name," indicating,

doubtless, that, at present, incommunicable name of God, which, appearing in the vision of the Word of God (xix. 11-21) as worn by the faithful and true, "a name written that no man knew but He Himself," is to be revealed also to each faithful and true witness in his measure who overcomes to the end.

Thus the "name" of the previous promise is here amplified and expanded into a trinity of names, and in the stair of heavenly blessedness we reach in the sixth promise that step which assures of permanence of consecration and preservation for eternity. It may be noted, surely, as remarkable that even an earthly permanence, of a kind, has belonged to Philadelphia. Of all the seven Churches, Philadelphia had the longest duration of prosperity as a Christian city. Even now it remains a considerable town, and has within its circuit the remains of at least twenty-four churches.

VII. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH OF LAODICEA.

"To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne" (iii. 21).

The connection between this promise and the special circumstances of the Church at Laodicea appears more difficult to trace than the correspondence in regard to any other of the seven promises. Yet reflection convinces one that a connection decidedly exists. The "riches and goods," of boasting of which the Laodicean Church is accused in the epistle addressed to it, were, no doubt, possessions of a *spiritual* order. At the same time, there appears to be good ground for believing that the Church of Laodicea, as it continued to be prominent among the Churches long afterwards, so it was when St. John wrote, opulent and prosperous in a worldly sense. Indeed, in all probability it was a state of prosperity and inglorious ease which produced that lukewarmness which is condemned with such startlingly bold imagery in the epistle. The energies and zeal of the Laodicean Christians were braced and inflamed by no such opposition as that with which the Church of Philadelphia had to contend.

Moreover, this lukewarmness which is so hateful to Him "that walketh among the seven golden candlesticks," was accompanied in the case of the Laodicean Church by a Pharisaic self-satisfaction and gratulation. It is not surprising, then, that the epistle to this Church is characterized by sternness of rebuke and even rejection beyond all the rest. But what is indeed remarkable is that it is to this same Church that the last and most glorious of the promises belongs, and that promise is preceded by words of yearning tenderness such as are absent from all the other epistles. As no other message opens with such sharp severity, so none closes with such glorious and tender words. Where, then, is the correspondence of the promise with the circumstances of the Church? Not, I think, where it has been sometimes supposed to lie—in the greater difficulty in *overcoming* which would be experienced by the lukewarm, but in the offer of the loftiest reward of all, enthronization with Christ Himself, to those who were not even "cold," but in the desperate condition of lukewarmness, who ranked, not with the publicans and harlots of our Lord's day, but rather with those scribes and Pharisees before whom, He said, those others went into the kingdom of God. Not beyond the reach of even these was the highest reward, if only they would be zealous and repent, and purchase the true riches of the Lord. Or the force of the promise may lie simply in the surpassing and eternal glory of a seat in the throne beside the Lord Himself as the reward of those who should despise mere earthly prosperity and wealth. Perhaps the greatness of their declension necessitated, or made wise for their incitement, the greatness of reward here offered. At any rate, it wonderfully demonstrates the yearning and forbearing love of Christ.

The last and most glorious promise made to the most severely censured Church presents us with the correlation of height and depth, a seat beside the King of Kings in His throne offered to those whom He as yet rejects with utmost loathing. No further height than this can possibly be attained. Step by step we have reached the final glory, a glory infinitely

greater than that which Christ promised to and petitioned for the twelve—that they should sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel, and behold His glory (Matt. xix. 28 ; John xvii. 24). In a place beside the Lord Himself on His throne we have reached the climax, the apotheosis in a new sense, as has been said, of the victor.



Literary Notes.

BISHOP POTTER'S forthcoming book, "Bishops and Archbishops," the volume of recollections of the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in America, will be found to be very interesting. In no sense, Bishop Potter writes in his preface, do the reminiscences "presume to be biographies. In no light can they be read as embodying the graver material of history. But they will furnish some of those sidelights by means of which individuality in human portraiture may be detected, and in the often lighter and more playful quality of which are recognised or recalled those more endearing characteristics which make men widely remembered and genuinely loved." The volume was suggested to Bishop Potter some three years ago while returning home from a dinner which the Hon. Whitelaw Reid had given, and the Bishop regretted that the reminiscences which had been exchanged that night—it was a dinner given on the occasion of the unveiling of a statue of General Sherman—of Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, and others would never be put on paper. But, Bishop Potter writes, "I had not gone a great way in this pharisaic judgment of my fellows, when I was seized with the memory of official relations of my own" with the House of Bishops, with which the author became connected at the end of 1886, when he was elected secretary.



Mr. George Wyndham, now that he no longer has the worries of an important office upon his shoulders, has had time to devote himself to the completion of his work, "Ronsard and La Pléiade." It opens with an essay of sixty pages on the famous sixteenth-century association of poets and scholars, who called themselves at first "La Brigade," and afterwards "La Pléiade," in imitation of poets at the Court of Ptolemy Philadelphus. The confederacy consisted of Ronsard, Du Bellay, Dorat, De Baif, Estierme Jodelle, Pontus de Tyard, and Remy Belleau. To these must be added Olivier de Mogny and, later, many others to fill the places of the dead—Jean Passerat, Gilles Durant, and Philippe des Portes. The essay first deals with "The Age and the Men," then with the sources of their inspiration and the aim of their art, and concludes with an estimate of their achievement and influence. Mr. Wyndham's essay is followed by selections from the poetry of The Pléiade and their School, and this portion of the work