

Some Thoughts on the Seven Epistles.

III.

WE open this month the Epistle to the Angel of Pergamus, or Pergamum. The name of the city appears in both forms, and it occurs here in a construction which, bringing in the dative (ἐν Περγαμῷ), leaves the choice doubtful. The Revisers of 1881 are probably right in preferring Pergamum, the form which is by far the most frequent in ancient literature.

The city was in the Mysian region, considerably north of Ephesus and Smyrna. It is interesting to remember that its name lives for us in a familiar English word. *Parchment* is the modern shape of the old English *perchemin*. And this is nothing other than *pergamene*, *charta pergamena*. Parchment, as a substitute for papyrus (*paper*), was either invented at Pergamum, or was first used in that city, which, in the second century before Christ, was famous for its great library.

But let me not forget the purpose of these papers. I do not write to annotate the many points of historical and literary interest in the text of the Epistles. I ask only to recall and, if it may be, to accentuate some of their spiritual messages. We will remember as we go that precisely for such use they were written. The man whose ear was spiritually open was to hear in them the Spirit's voice rather than the antiquary's. The seven stars and the seven lamps, the "angels" and the churches, are expressly called (i. 20) a "mystery," a spiritual secret offered for the believer's insight. Let us approach this Epistle, as every other, in the recollection of that fact.

The divine Sender of the message to the Pergamene "angel" follows the order of His two former utterances. First He sets forth Himself, in words going back to the great initial vision of His glory. He "hath the sharp two-edged sword," the sword which was seen (i. 16) not grasped in His hand, but flashing from His mouth; the symbol of unerring and formidable words of doom; the sword which, later in the message (ver. 16),

is to strike the false disciples at Pergamum. Then follows the Master's "knowledge" of the servant's conditions—not, in this case, in the first place, of his "works," though they are soon to be in view, but of his environment, his abode. "I know where thou dwellest; even where the throne of Satan is." The precise reference of that tremendous allusion is lost to us. We know nothing of Pergamum which would indicate that it was a seat, eminently bad, of idolatry and its vices, a Mysian Benares; we can only gather that forces of violent evil, the spirit of blasphemy and persecution, were particularly rampant there. Then follows the gracious tribute of Him who delights to praise, as He recounts the faith and courage of His "angel." The "angel" was loyal to the holy Name, a bold confessor of the Son of God and Man, the Saviour and the King of His disciples. He had faced and conquered a burst of persecuting wrath. "Thou didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful one, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." It seems to be implied that the "angel" himself had been assailed along with Antipas, set face to face with death, found true under the supreme test; and his Lord does not forget it. But then the voice changes, as it had changed to the Ephesian "angel"; the accent of loving praise passes into that of loving conviction. "A few things," few, in that gracious judgment, as against the "many" of the fidelity of personal love, were wrong in the "angel's" work. He was tolerating evil lives lived by evil theory. These cancerous mischiefs so strangely rife in the latter days of the apostolic time, the teachings which justified impurity either by a shocking perversion of free grace (see, *e.g.*, Phil. iii. 18 compared with Rom. vi. 1), or by an entirely pagan theory of the essential badness of matter, were present at Pergamum. The old moral fall of Israel in the field of Moab, brought on by the diabolical suggestion of Balaam, was being repeated. The disciples, or those who seemed to be disciples, were trifling with idol festivities as things indifferent to the "illuminated," and giving over their bodies to sexual pollution; for did not the

spirit dwell aloft and apart, above the miserable *body*? And the "angel" let this evil alone. So-called Christians ate things offered to idols, and committed fornication, and there was no "sword in his mouth" against them, no warning that the Balaamite and the Nicolaitan were not merely discrediting the disciple's name but treading the path to hell. Then follows the merciful forewarning to this pastor, so true and so brave in his own person, so like a later Eli in his office. "Repent, or I will come unto thee quickly," with a stern suddenness of personal visitation, "and will fight against them," these miserable transgressors, "with the sword of my mouth":—"Depart from me; I never knew you." And we may be sure that, while the dreadful "sword" would directly strike only the misguided transgressors, it would indirectly bring innermost pangs to the "angel's" own soul. He, for he was at heart a true shepherd and not a hireling, would realize with inexpressible self-reproach that he might have precluded the Lord's own stroke of final execution if he had more bravely used the sword of his own mouth in faithful warning and resolute discipline. Nor would the Church as a whole escape the tribulation, if only as it saw the judgment, whatever it might be, fall upon those who were once associates in worship and profession, and as it recollected that the Church too, as well as its pastor, might have warded off the tremendous blow by a bolder witness for truth and purity.

Then lastly, as ever, comes the promise to the overcomer. Has the Christian disciple at Pergamum, keeping near his Lord and getting strength continuously from Him, conquered the subtleties of evil men and the Evil One, and trodden, in his own soul's walk with God, upon the serpents and scorpions of temptation? He shall be ushered, in the coming hour of eternal reward, into the heavenly sanctuary, into the Holy of Holies of the better life. In the consecrated recess of the Mosaic Tabernacle was stored the relic of that manna (Exod. xvi. 32-34) which had been the "bread from heaven" of the pilgrims of the Desert. And there too, in the great crises of

the people's need, the High Priest had consulted the will of God through the mysterious Urim. And it is possible, at least,¹ that the "lights and perfections" concealed within the doubly-folded breastplate with its jewelled exterior, was nothing other than a great and glorious diamond, or diamonds, in whose depths of light, we do not know how, the instructed Priest could read the signs and symbols of the oraculous answer² of Jehovah. Have we not here, in the promise to the overcomer, who had refused to enter the foul inner shrine of spiritualized pollution, a correspondence to these great types of the old Law? He should indeed be *initiated* into *mysteries* in the heavenly Temple. The eternal Priest would give him the true bread in its celestial perfection, every veil withdrawn from the glory of the gift of a life hid with Christ in God; yea, Christ who is our Life should there and then surround and fill him with all His manifested bliss and power. And there too and then the Mediator should take, as it were, from its deep and holy concealment the full splendour of the revelation of "the secret love of God" for the faithful pilgrim, steadfast to the end. The Urim should be trusted to his very hands. He should look into the radiancy of the covenanted gift of eternal peace and salvation, and read there the *nomen ineffabile*, the "new name" of his Lord, all that is meant in the eternal life by JEHOVAH-JESUS.

"No one knoweth that name," in all its depths and heights of love and bliss, "but he that receiveth it," receiveth the bright white stone in the Holy Place at last.

I might write down at length some of the many other conjectures with which the riddle of this passage has been approached. But for myself the elucidation offered here has long seemed the most completely satisfying, since, in early days of Scripture study, I read it in Trench's commentary. However,

¹ See the interesting discussion of Trench (*Seven Epistles*, pp. 126 and following).

² In the A.V., and in R.V. text, in Exod. xxviii. 18, the word "diamond" occurs as denoting one of the *exterior* stones. But the translation is doubtful. R.V. margin reads "carbuncle."

the riddle, like the stone, is itself radiant; it shines with a promise which, on any showing, means an ineffable satisfying, a great unveiling of the Lord to His faithful one in the bright hereafter. Then shall the eternal life, the powers of the hidden manna, possess the whole ransomed being. Then the "Name that is above every name" shall speak into the whole consciousness of the saint made perfect its unsearchable treasure of joy and love.

As we look back now over the Epistle, two main points in it may challenge specially our reverent thought.

1. "*I know where thou dwellest.*" Here are words which may often carry a message of cheer and power to the Christian in his, or in her, hours of trial, abnormal or normal. What a difference is made to the consciousness, very often, by the environment of the life! Perhaps it may be a scene *materially* unbeautiful and depressing. Not seldom I have spoken on these words to newly-ordained men, in a farewell address in the evening of the day when I had laid hands on their heads and set them apart to be, what the clergyman is, the possession of other people, in a life to be lived for other people's sake. Of one and another thus ordained I have known that his life will have to be lived in a place totally devoid of the "amenities" of outlook; in rooms, perhaps, small and dingy, in "the long unlovely street" of an altogether industrial town, or of a village of the pit-land, where monotonous "rows" stretch their straight lines of dull uniformity, one behind another, at the foot of the mountainous slag-heap. And it was well, on such an occasion, to be able to remind my brothers in the Lord and His work that He, intimately, with all the sympathy of His manhood, knew where they were going to dwell. Then further, the scene of external discouragement was pretty sure to contain within it some human elements of special trial, to the feelings, the will, the faith. The man would be tempted sometimes to think that any parochial problems but just these, any group of characters but just those of certain people who daily crossed the path, or shared it, would be easier to get on with. Then comes the

Lord, and tells His tired but loving servant that He knows all about the local human conditions. His eyes see everything and everyone. He feels, as He dwells in His disciple's heart by faith, exactly what that heart feels of the pressure, the discordant notes, the dearth of spiritual comradeship, the seeming refusal of just that soil to respond to the pastor's tilling. "I know where thou dwellest." And He who knows it, and lets us know that He knows it, is able, and is more than willing, so long as He leaves His servant just there, to be Himself the inmost *locality* of all, at the centre of all externals, the mysterious Home of Peace within them. "Thou wilt hide them in the secret of Thy presence . . . before the sons of men!"

I have preached more than one sermon on the text, from the first sentences of the Philippian Epistle (rendering the Greek exactly), "*In Christ, in Philippi.*" "In Philippi," that difficult scene for the spiritual life, the Roman "colony" with its pagan military traditions. Yes, but "in Christ" in the midst of Philippi, "hid with Him in God," every day and every hour, and so more than able to *live* just there—a life real, neighbourly, serviceable, while happy and holy in its deep interior.

2. "*In the days of Antipas, my faithful one.*" Of this early martyr, for he "was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth," we know nothing whatever beyond this allusion. The earliest subsequent mentions of him (there is one in Tertullian, about a century after) betray no other sources of information. Later martyrologies make him Bishop of Pergamum, and detail the mode of his martyrdom; but imagination is their only authority. All the more moving and impressive is this solitary word, dropped from the voice of the Lord in His glory, the voice as "of many waters," which yet can articulate and make immortal the name of an unknown sufferer for Him. He who perfectly knew where the Pergamene "angel" dwelt knew perfectly also how the Pergamene martyr was seized, and questioned, and put to the tremendous test, and found by God and man to be "the faithful one," under the black shadow of the Enemy's "throne." No loyal disciple is too obscure for the intimacy of

the memory of the Lord Jesus Christ. He lets the record of blessed Polycarp, at Smyrna, be preserved for us in full and heart-moving detail in that noble relic of the sub-apostolic literature from which I quoted a specimen in the course of our second study. We seem to know a great deal, on excellent authority, about what Polycarp was as a man, and how he met and overcame his fiery trial, having confessed his "King who saved him" in words that will never die. And then the same Master has suffered that every trace of Antipas, outside this verse, should perish. But no; He has not suffered it to *perish*. "The record is on high." It is written down in full in the book which waits to be opened in the morning light of heaven.

When that hour comes, what an innumerable host of names lost on earth but glorious to God will be "mentioned" in the proclamation of His awards of the crown of life! Some of them, is it not possible? will even outshine illustrious reputations of Christian history. The saints who bore those obscure names were not called to do epoch-making deeds affecting nations and Churches. They were not great in the sense of genius, or of the human force which cannot help coming to the front, and leading the way, and leaving a mark upon the paths of time. But they were simply and altogether true to their Lord. He was all, really all, their salvation and their desire. They did not once think of fame, but always of Him. And now, look and hearken! He confesses their names before His Father, and before the angels. His unnoticed faithful ones are great in the history of the eternal life.

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