

Beauties of the Truth

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Thought to be Harmonious with God's Plan of the Ages
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The Letter to Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead’ ” (Revelation 3:1, NASB).

SARDIS AND EPHEBUS

The messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation have a fourfold reference. First, there is the local one, to the churches actually addressed. Second, there is an admonitory application — to all churches in all time — as tests by which they may discern their true spiritual state in the Lord's sight. Third, there is a personal application, which we read in the exhortation “to him that hath an ear,” and in the promises “to him that overcometh.” Fourth, there is a prophetic one, disclosing the successive phases in the church's spiritual history. For in each of the churches we see a pattern that has been repeated again and again through the centuries, and the progress or development of its spiritual state as seven stages or epochs until the church is complete. What if we were to compare Ephesus (the 1st church) and Sardis (the 5th church)?

The analogy between the letters of Ephesus and Sardis is close, and the two have to be studied together. History has moved in similar lines with the two churches. Both had begun enthusiastically and had cooled down. Degeneration was in fact in both, but in Ephesus the degeneration had not become so serious as in Sardis. Hence in the Ephesian letter the emphasis is merely on change, instability, and uncertainty. In the letter to Sardis the emphasis is degradation, false pretension and death.

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY OF SARDIS

The ancient city of Sardis was located about 35 miles southeast of Thyatira (30 miles south of Thyatira, 50 miles due east of Smyrna). It was built on the summit of one of the foothills of Mt. Tmolus and stood on a lofty plateau, 1500 sheer feet above the plain. Only a small city could perch on that summit, but it was an impregnable fortress. On the eastern flank of the city was the acropolis fort and it could only be reached by a narrow neck of land. On all the other sides the

cliffs were smooth, steep walls of rock, almost perpendicular and unscalable.

The historian Pliny says that the art of dying wool was invented there.¹ Gold was found in the bed of the Pactolus River, flowing on the western edge. Gold and silver coins are said to have been minted there, and Sardis was a very wealthy city. Its rich citizens were patrons of the mystery cult, including that of Cybele, which claimed power to restore life to the dead.² In spite of its almost impregnable acropolis, Sardis, through over confidence and carelessness, was overcome by Cyrus the Great (in 546 BC). It fell similarly to Antiochus the Great (in 218 BC) and the days of its greatness were at an end. In AD 17 Sardis was devastated by an earthquake but was rebuilt through the generosity of the Emperor Tiberius, but it never regained its former glory.

A SEVERE LETTER

The letter to the church at Sardis is one of the most severe of the seven. The account given of this church is singularly like that which history gives to the city. Years of proclaiming the truth had not delivered it from the spirit of the city, which boasted her great name and fame. The church closed her eyes to the danger of overwhelming self confidence. Within a single generation the Church was repeating the city's history of a thousand years. We must consider the message to this church, beginning with the phrase “Alive yet Dead.”

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BEAUTIES OF THE TRUTH is published as a service to the brethren to stimulate their consideration and appreciation of the boundless riches of God's Word. It is published free of charge. Subscriptions will be entered for all who request it. Address all correspondence to: Beauties of the Truth, 6748 Breckenridge, Lisle, IL 60532. Editorial Board: Brs. Richard Doctor (Managing Editor), Carl Hagensick, Jerry Leslie, Raymond Luke, Michael Nekora, David Rice, Richard Suraci.

In Revelation 3:1 attention is directed to the fact that the Savior had the seven Spirits of God, which seems to be emblematic of the holy Spirit of the Lord in its completeness (7), perfection (7) and operation in the fullness of its power (7). This reaffirms the completeness of the divine will, influence and power exercised any and everywhere, and for any purpose in harmony with the divine holiness.

What does it mean that he held the seven stars? This is emblematic of the seven messengers of the churches. This would imply that he had entire control over them and that he had the power to continue or remove the ministry (Revelation 1:20, 2:1). In the latter part of Revelation 3:1 the same impressive formula as in all the letters warns the church that it was under unerring scrutiny: "I know thy works," *i.e.*, the works that thou hast wrought are known to me (*cf.* Revelation 2:2, 9, 13, 19, 3:8, 15).

This phrase is the introduction to an almost unqualified rebuke: "thou hast a name that thou livest and [thou] art dead." These words were as shocking to the church as the earthquake of AD 17 had been to the city. Indeed, the church of Sardis had acquired a name. Its reputation as a progressive church had evidently spread far and wide. It was well regarded in the city. The other six churches in the province knew it for its vitality. No false doctrine seemed to be taking root in its fellowship. We hear of neither Balaam, nor Nicolaitans, nor Jezebel. It appears that its fellowship was quite large for those days, that is, it was growing and even fashionable. Its programs probably included many excellent projects. It was a beehive (buzzing) with activity. There was no shortage in the church of money or talent or manpower. There was every indication of life and vigor — but — the outward appearances can be deceptive. This socially distinguished church seemed to be alive, but it was actually dead.

The eyes of Christ pierced to the heart of the matter, and this condition is exposed in Revelation 3:2. "I have not found your works perfect [fulfilled] in the sight of my God." The church, like the city, had fulfilled none of its works. Beginning with great ambitions, high hopes, and noble endeavors, it lacked the grace of perseverance, and so had realized nothing. The works were a routine of duties, but did not fulfill God's purpose and pattern. The Church Sardis had acquired a name — reputation — with men but not with God.

There is another indication given in the letter to show what is meant by spiritual death overtaking the Church of Sardis, namely, the few who did not share in the general deterioration. They are described in verse four as "people who have not soiled [defiled] their garments." Sin had crept into the church, less openly than in the case of Jezebel at Thyatira, but the piercing eyes of Christ did not miss its defiling influence. According to Herodotus (the historian), the people of Sardis, over many years, had acquired a reputation for lax moral standards and even open licentiousness.³ Perhaps the church at Sardis had forgotten Paul's exhortation, "Do not be conformed to this world," or John's, "Do not love the world or the things in the world." It may be that gradually, even imperceptibly, the leaven of wickedness and



Sardis, a City of Asia Minor

worldliness had spread until the whole lump had become contaminated by its influence. Throughout history, churches (and individuals) have evidenced signs of death.

What are some other signs of death in the church? A church is in danger of death when it does not recognize its weaknesses. Sardis rested secure and arrogant in the belief that no one could destroy or conquer it. After all, the city was built on a high rocky hill on a narrow neck of land, inaccessible except when approached on the right road. There was but one small crevice in the hill guarded all day long, but 200 years before Christ intruders had come by night and dealt a crushing blow to the city. It was never guarded at night! That was their weak point!

The church is in danger of death when the Lord is merely an historic title and not, in reality, the head of the Church. That is a weak point! When belonging to a lively church has become a badge of honor, a sign of having arrived, then beware of the angel of death. Reputation for liveliness can produce in the fellowship arrogance and confidence based on their own ability and strategizing. When organization, activity, business, reputation and image are central, they are like intruders poised to deal a crushing blow.

Are we so busy with the work of the Lord that we forget the Lord of the work? A church is in danger of death when there is resistance to change and inflexibility, or worship of the past. This is usually indicated by the words, "we've always done it this way." We must not live in the past, but recall it, and we need to prayerfully compare what we are with what we were. This is healthy and maybe a disturbing experience but is necessary to keep our spiritual life. The church is in danger of death when there is a loss of zeal or fervor for proclaiming the truth.

Let us guard against a tendency to lose interest in a vivid expectation of the kingdom. If unmet expectations of Bible chronology have created disappointments and discouragement and caused some to fall away; others, blessed with a knowledge of these things (the truth) who fail to live up to the standards of their profession, have also fallen into disappointment and discouragement. One evidence of this may be the tendency to retire more and more into a “devotional” Christian life. Meetings tend to become pleasant Christian gatherings where the glories of the past are recounted and enlarged upon, but there is no looking forward to the future. The personal witness is to the consecrated, and the testimony meeting replaces the public witness. The vision of the kingdom fades; it can do no other, for the basis of the inspiration as spoken of in the living words of John the Baptist, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” are now lost.

But the Christian life is a missionary life. When the enthusiasm in the church for proclaiming the truth upon every suitable opportunity declines; then the danger of death increases. And like Paul, necessity is laid upon us, yes, woe unto us if we preach not the gospel (truth) (1 Corinthians 9:16). The church is in danger of death when there is greater concern with form than with life. All religious observances and duties have been reduced to a mechanical standard and arrangement. Are we regular in our forms of worship and strict in their observances? We can keep the Word of God outwardly — but the Lord requires the heart — and he knows that we have not rendered it if our life and worship is a mere form.

This illustrates the law of spiritual declension we may read in Matthew 15:1-20. First, there is an inward collapse and a re-installation of the spirit of selfishness; and then there is an attempt to find a framework — one that only can be found in spiritual reality and completeness — to serve as a cover. Attempts are made to keep up the framework (cover) of appearances to the last; an anxiety of mind to save appearances at the expense of truth. Are we endeavoring to keep up appearances by church-going, by continuance in customary ways, by habits and usages for which we really have no heart, but which we must appear to respect or other people will begin to imagine the real state of our spirit? We are to remember that God sees us as we are: we are to be true to ourselves. We are to attach the right label to our own actions and not to shrink from the solemn fact of our spiritual state.

Let us never sacrifice inner reality for outward pretensions. We die spiritually when our pretensions are not supported by an inward reality — So, let us consider: What are we in our heart? What is our meaning? What is our purpose? These are the vital questions which we must put to ourselves and answer if we would have real depth of life (Isaiah 29:13, 2 Timothy 3:5). What is the remedy of Christ’s counsel? What could be done for the dead church in Sardis? For this, the Savior gives this church five urgent commands: (1) Awake! Or, Be watchful! (2) Strengthen what remains! (3) Remember! (4) Keep that! Or, Hold fast! (5) Repent!

“AWAKE!”

To be “Awake!,” or to “Be watchful!,” means that they were to be attentive and earnest and guard against the subtle encroachment of “the sin which doth so easily beset” (Hebrews 12:1). This was in contrast to their present condition.

“STRENGTHEN!”

They were to strengthen the true piety that still lived and lingered among them, that the love of the Savior might not become wholly extinct. There were a few in Sardis who still maintained their spiritual life and walk with the Lord.

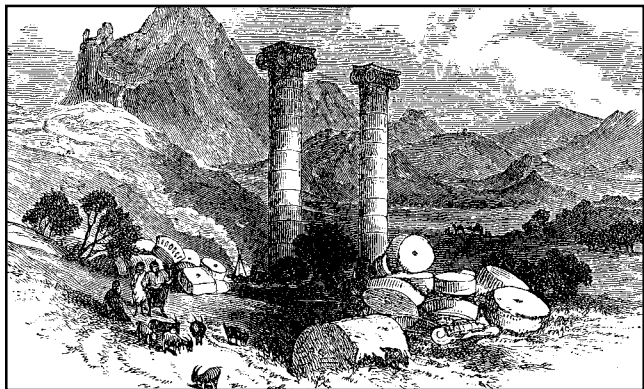
“REMEMBER!”

They were to remember what they had received; that is, the holy spirit of God in its various aspects. (Matthew 3:16, Romans 8:9, 14). They were to remember the spirit of the Father (John 5:26, Galatians 4:6). They were to remember the Father of spirits (Hebrews 12:9). They were to remember the spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13). They were to remember the spirit of knowledge (Isaiah 11:2), “... the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge ...” (Exodus 35:30, 31, 28:3, 31:3, 4, and see *Studies in the Scriptures*, Volume 5, pages 175-6.) They were to remember the spirit of adoption (Romans 8:15). They were to remember the spirit of life (Romans 8:2). They were to remember the spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:29). They were to remember the spirit of promise (Ephesians 1:13, and see *Studies in the Scriptures*, Volume 5, pages 167 ff).

They had heard the truth (John 14:13-17, 15:26, 17:17) and yet they are told in Revelation 3:3 to “Remember then what you received.” What had they received which they were to remember? This refers to the holy Spirit as received in its various aspects (John 20:22, Acts 2:38, 19:2, John 14:17, Galatians 3:2, Romans 8:9). For certainly, one of the greatest gifts the Christian has ever received, ever will, or ever could receive is the Spirit of God Himself; His mind, disposition, and character (Galatians 5:22, 23, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 Corinthians 6:19, 3:16). Hence the admonition, “Remember then what you received.”

Revelation 3:1 suggests that this is the interpretation intended. Here Christ describes Himself as the One “who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” In every epistle or letter the introductory description which He gives of Himself is suited to the condition of the particular church addressed. That the “seven spirits of God” denotes the holy Spirit in its fullness of power, influence, will, exercising completeness and perfection in its operation, can be deduced from the first occurrence of the phrase. In Revelation 1:4, 5, a grace and peace are desired for the seven churches in Asia, “from Him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ.” Here the seven spirits are linked with the Eternal Father and with Jesus Christ as the source and channel of both grace and peace. The closeness of these seven spirits to the throne (Revelation 4:5), and their intimate relation to Jesus Christ (Revelation 5:6) suggests the same conclusion that they represent the holy Spirit.

Now the Spirit of Christ is “the Spirit of Life” (Romans 8:2). Yet the condition of Sardis was, “Thou art dead.” What could be more appropriate for a church (Sardis) that had “grieved the Spirit” and “quenched” it? (Ephesians 4:30, 1 Thessalonians 5:19). A church is alive when it is “filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). In the Greek, this verb is a present imperative passive; it means, “go on being filled!” or even, “be in the state of being filled!” We spend much time planning. Do we spend little time praying? We work for God. Do we wait on God? We think and organize. We admin-



The Ruins of Sardis.

ister great projects and create impressive committees; but do we do these things as the Lord would have us do them — in the holy Spirit of the Lord — or are they done, “just to fill a slot,” a routine? Only when a church is filled with the Spirit of Christ can spiritual death be banished and a name for life have any reality behind it.

“Hold fast!” or, literally, “keep on keeping.” They were to keep what they had received and heard: to make the Truth their own. Ezekiel 33:30-33 illustrates the danger of not personally and specifically weaving the Truth of God into our lives and failing to “keep what thou hast heard.” In verse 30 man says to man, “come, hear the word of the Lord,” while verse 31 presents a distressing possibility, “They come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with their lips they show much love, but their heart is set on their gain.” From verse 32 we find a misdirected admiration: “Lo, you are to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.” Finally in verse 33 we are presented with the possibility of a too-late discovery, “When this comes [Jerusalem’s fall] — and come it will! — then they will know that a prophet has been among them” (RSV). These are words to people who heard the truth but failed to apply it (Isaiah 29:13, Matthew 21:28-32, James 1:22-25).

“REPENT!”

Literally, this is “do it now!” Their repentance implies survival instead of death. Two things are necessary for survival: first, the ability to make a clear, definite decision at the crucial time, and second, to persevere by carrying out that decision under trial.

What do we mean by repentance? Consider this illustration. It was a cold winter evening, and a man was busy stoking his fire when a piece of coal fell from the fire into the hearth. Being the daring man he was, he thought, “I’ll just pick up the coal quickly and toss it back into the fire” — and he did so. But the coal had not lost its heat; and the man, with painfully burnt fingers, made two split-second decisions: one, I shouldn’t have done it in the first place; and two, I won’t do it again! That is repentance! It is a determination made in the light of an action or actions in the past, that will affect not only the present, but intentionally, the rest of one’s life.

WARNING TO AROUSE RESPONSE

In Revelation 3:3 we read, “If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” It seems undeniable that the messages select topics that rise out and stand in close relation to the past history of Sardis as a city. The church is warned that it must watch if it is not to be surprised as a thief in the night. “I will come as a thief.” This no doubt reminded the church of Sardis of the city’s past, for in the critical times of its history, they had not been alert. The great wealth of the nation, along with its “impregnable” outer defense, fostered a false sense of security. The steep, rocky fortress was unguarded at night. The lesson of old days had not been learned; experience had been forgotten; men were too slack and careless; and when the moment of need came, Sardis was unprepared — the fortress was taken and the city captured.

Here we have a lesson in the danger of careless security and over confidence. What happened at Sardis could happen at any time and at any place. Put on and keep on the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). The battle is not over until it is over, “Let not him that girdeth on his armor boast himself as he that taketh it off” (1 Kings 20:11).

“... and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” This is the way in which God often comes in His heavy judgments. Long beforehand, he admonished Sardis of the consequences of a course of sin. He warned them to turn from it; but when they refused to attend to his warning, and still walked in the way of evil, he comes suddenly, and executes (or carries out) the promised judgment. Did the church at Sardis heed the warning? Sadly, not. A traveler, in beholding Sardis, recorded an impression of “... indescribable solitude, like the darkness of Egypt.”⁴ That is, “darkness that could be felt.” So deep is the solitude of the spot that once was the celebrated “lady of kingdoms!” now producing a corresponding feeling of desolate abandonment in the mind, “which can never be forgotten.”

PROMISES FOR THE FAITHFUL OVERCOMERS

We read in verse 4, “they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.” And, in verse 5, “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment.” White represents the righteousness of the final victory. All Roman citizens wore the pure white toga on holidays and at religious ceremonies. Especially on the day of a Triumph, white was the

universal color. Although the Triumph could only be celebrated in Rome, and then only when an Emperor was present in person, the Church at Sardis would know, partly from reports and descriptions given, and partly from seeing the ceremonies in the great Imperial festivals which were modeled after the Triumph, that this was the most typical and final victory.

“They shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.” They are fully covered by the robe of Christ’s righteousness, for they did not defile (soil) their garments (Isaiah 61:10). Those overcomers, the glorified Church, are represented as continuing to walk in white raiment, not as now, in a robe of reckoned righteousness, but in a robe of actual righteousness (Revelation 19:8, R5377). This is the final victory or Triumph.

“I will not blot out his name out of the book of life.” In verse 5 the book of life refers to the list of citizens, or of living members, of the body of society from which the dead are struck out (Exodus 32:32ff, Psalm 69:28, Luke 10:20, Revelation 13:8, 17:8, 20:12,15, 21:27). The Bible mentions two books of life, one appertaining to the present time in this scripture and the other to the Millennial Age (Revelation 20:12). The special book of life that is open at this time is the one in which the names of the overcomers of this Gospel Age are written. Just as a family will keep a record of its members, so with those who become members of the family of God, through Christ; their names will be recorded. In order to maintain that position, they must be overcomers. All those who go into the second death will be blotted out of the special record, and their names will have no place in the book of life (R5377).

“... but I will confess his name before my Father and His angels.” The Lord will not be ashamed to confess the overcomers to his Father — the great Emperor of the Universe — and will say, “They have walked in my footsteps ... They have overcome” (R5669, Luke 12:8, 9, Matthew 10:32, 33).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

And so the epistle closes, the church at Sardis, like the city, had an appearance without reality. They had a reputation — name — with men but not with the Lord. There was promise without performance. Its works were not fulfilled before God. The task, like the city’s fortifications twice in history, remained incomplete in vital points. Carelessness and over confidence born of apparent strength brought a want of watchfulness. It lead to disaster. Like the city, the church had received great advantages. Like the city, the church had used them ill, and had now to fear sudden overthrow and extinction. “I will come upon you,” says the divine Judge, “and you will not know at [during what sort, Rotherham] of hour I shall come.”

Note the phrase. It is not “at” what hour, such visitations are less nicely placed. Our duty is to be watchful, not at fixed hours but over all the length of days. The battle is not over until it is over, “Let not him that girdeth on his armor boast himself as he that taketh it off” (1 Kings 20:11). Could any

reader or listener of the letter to Sardis hear the phrase, and not remember Hyroeades, the soldier of Cyrus — or the Cretan mercenary of Antiochus — creeping, climbing in the night, testing footholds on the crumbling stone, crouching as stone and pebble tumbled away in the darkness, but coming higher, nearer, while the sentinels slept and all seemed secure in the careless city? So spiritual death creeps upon men. Preoccupied with their own affairs, they do not recognize the deadly torpor, the stagnation, the sluggishness, which lays hold on mind and heart until the character is changed — and the divine Judge pronounces the verdict, “Dead.” God has a book — the Book of Life. Names are written in it. One day the Book will be opened and the roll will be called. If our name is called, the Lord will vouch for us — confess our name — in the presence of the Father. But if it isn’t called — “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches.”

— Bro. David Skein

(1) Pliny (the elder), *Naturalis Historia* [Natural History] 5, 29; 15, 23.

(2) *Bible Dictionary*, “Sardis,” Harper, pp. 645-6.

(3) Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1, 69, 94; 3, 48; 8, 105.

(4) Arundell, F., *Discoveries in Asia Minor*, Volume 2, Elibron Classics (2001) page 88.

The Way of an Eagle in the Air

As a boy, I was lying on my back one day in the woods in the Finger Lakes region of New York State, drinking in the beauty of nature. As I looked up through the foliage of the trees around me, I noticed a stirring overhead. Lo and behold, a bald eagle was resting on one of the upper branches, and not having seen one before, I marveled at this bird. In fact, the experience was so impressive that it left an indelible print on my mind. Years later I realized that the eagle was used in Scripture as a symbol and that a study of the bird and its habits and characteristics was of much profit — especially as used by the Holy Spirit to teach valuable lessons to the Lord’s people.

The eagle is considered to be the king of the birds because of its formidable size, its noble appearance, and its unrivaled powers of flight. Characteristically shunning society, the eagle is rarely seen over country where even one or two houses are present. Hence it usually keeps to higher ground and is found in uninhabited areas. A bird of silence, the eagle never advertises its presence or nest (known as an aerie) by calling ... [for] the eagle is a lone bird, rarely traveling even with its mate, and preferring to live on freshly slain animals ... It can live more than a century, although traps, guns, and poison usually claim an eagle before its life span is complete. One bird lived 104 years in confinement in Vienna. An eagle shot in France had a golden band around its neck indicating it had been used for falconry purposes

ninety-five years earlier. Another bird, captured not in the feathering state but in the period of its strength, subsequently lived eighty years in confinement.

FAST FLIGHT

Under certain conditions, the golden eagle is the fastest bird that flies. In blustery weather, it has no equal, yet on calm days, there are faster fliers. If one is fortunate enough to see an eagle as it leaves the aerie on a quiet day, the impression is of a heavy bird that progresses through the air with slow, almost labored, wing thrust. Actually, even under these conditions, the eagle is moving much faster than its appearance indicates, for it is deceptively fast in flight. Some have witnessed instances where other birds, known to be swift of wing, were fleeing in panic from an unseen enemy. Then the observers were startled to see an eagle appear on the scene, and with slow and indolent wing movement, the eagle rapidly overtook the other birds in their panicky flight and leisurely seized its prey in its strong talons. Thus a realization of the swiftness of the flight of the eagle dawns upon the inexperienced observer.

The raven and a few other birds are known to be swift and adept in shorter flight and movement. In fact, the raven often annoys the eagle in the air. The eagle's lack of maneuverability under certain circumstances constitutes a relative weakness. However, its swiftness of flight is recognized and used in the Bible, where we read expressions like "as swift as the eagle flieth," "as the eagle that hasteth to the prey," and, "as the eagle that hasteth to eat" (Deuteronomy 28:49, Job 9:26, Habbakuk 1:8). These expressions are used to vividly impress such lessons as the remarkably swift invasions into the Holy Land by some of Israel's enemies, notably King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. And the eagle was the emblem or ensign used by the renowned and feared legions of ancient Rome in the days of their glory and power. As a symbol, the eagle impressed enemies with the swift-



Jeremiah, whose prophecies speak of eagles.

ness of the destruction of the Roman armies against those who incurred the displeasure of Rome. The eagle was used as a symbol not only to show rapacity and ferocity of purpose but also to instill fear, as seen in the following texts:

"For thus saith the LORD; Behold, he shall fly as an eagle, and shall spread his wings over Moab" (Jeremiah 48:40).

"Behold, he shall come up and fly as the eagle, and spread his wings over Bozrah: and at that day shall the heart of the mighty men of Edom be as the heart of a woman in her [birth] pangs" (Jeremiah 49:22).

These two Scriptures are based upon a certain characteristic of the bird; namely, in seizing its prey, the eagle usually flies in the direction of the prey in such a way that it is also flying in the beams of the strong light of the sun, and thereby the approach of the eagle cannot be discerned. When only a few feet from the prey, the eagle suddenly opens its wings, thus creating a shadow over the unsuspecting prey. This sudden, startling appearance and the attendant darkening are designed to momentarily paralyze the prey with fear, much as in the case of the lion, which, with a terrifying roar, first paralyzes, and then pounces upon its frightened victim.

TOO WONDERFUL

"There be three things which are too wonderful for me ... The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea" (Proverbs 30:18, 19).

Of the "three things," we will treat only the first: "the way of an eagle in the air." When seen high in the heavens, the eagle is a supreme artist in its flight. It is a specialist in soaring and gliding. Much has been written about the eagle's soaring powers but little about its gliding, yet the gliding is more remarkable because it reveals the bird's complete mastery over the elements. For example, if a golden eagle decides to travel to a particular place, it does not fly like other birds. The eagle spirals to a height from which one long, continuous glide will take it faster and faster, until the wind literally whistles about its body. The glide may be either with the wind or against the wind, for indeed the eagle progresses almost as easily against the breeze as with it. Utilizing its mastery in gliding, the eagle arrives at a destination after a journey — but a journey in which little or no energy has been expended. One can almost say that distance means nothing to the bird.

No less inspiring than the beauty and the charm of the golden eagle's glide is its ability to sail in the teeth of a breeze. The wings extend broadly and stiffly, and a few primary feathers are held in an upward curve. Meanwhile, the steering and the stabilizing are done entirely by the tail, which is constantly being moved — now held wide open, now almost closed, now shutting and opening like a lady's fan.

WISDOM

The eagle is employed in the Bible to personify God's wisdom and His foster care on behalf of His people. Chapters 1 and 10 of the Book of Ezekiel and chapter 4 in the

Book of Revelation present a highly figurative and symbolic character portrayal of the glory and likeness of God. One of His four cardinal attributes is shown as the face of an eagle, but why? The reason is the remarkable vision of this bird, as stated in Job 39:29, “Her eyes behold afar off.” This text is a basis for saying that the eagle is a symbol of intelligence, wisdom, and omniscience. In everyday parlance, we speak of a person with good vision as having an eagle’s eye.

Next comes God’s loving care for the nation of Israel. His care is likened to the tender affection but also the firm treatment that is shown by the mother eagle toward her young when she teaches them to fly. “As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the LORD alone did lead him [Israel]” (Deuteronomy 32:11, 12).

The expression “stirreth up her nest” indicates that when the time comes for the young to leave the nest, the mother eagle removes the downy material within the nest exposing the prickly thorns and the sharp branches, the basic fabric of the nest. Also, for a season, she abstains from feeding her young, deliberately creating conditions of discomfiture designed to wean the eaglets from their former environs and to give them a desire to depart on their own. In addition, the mother bird allures the eaglets to imitate her fluttering in flight, demonstrates the rudiments of flight, and, with great currents of air generated by her strong and powerful wings, tends to alarm the insecure eaglets, almost blowing them out of the nest and impressing upon them the need and the urgency of learning to fly. Yet she hovers over her young in loving solicitude so that when the eaglets jump out into the unknown, her wings are in readiness to catch them should they become exhausted. In their weakness and timidity, she takes them upon her outspread wings and carries them to safety. The actions of the mother eagle are a beautiful picture of the fostering care, the discipline, and the training Israel received at the hand of Divine Providence to not be dependent upon others. The lesson for the nation is that their real dependence rests solely upon the Lord their God.

In a similar picture in the Book of Revelation, a woman, representing the true Church, was carried into a wilderness condition on the two wings of an eagle, the Old and New Testaments: “And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent” (Revelation 12:14).

The Book of Exodus adds the following thought, showing the process of development by which God draws His people to Himself: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel” (Exodus 19:4-6).

— Excerpted from “The Eagle” by Frank Shallieu

Peter and Mark in Babylon

“The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son” (1 Peter 5:13).

This rather obscure scripture of greetings holds within it three enigmas.

- (1) Who is it that is in Babylon?
- (2) To which Babylon does the apostle refer?
- (3) What was the relationship between Peter and Marcus?

It is the search for answers to these three questions that instigates our consideration of this text.

WHO IS IN BABYLON?

The three words “church that is” are italicized in the King James Version, showing they are supplied by the translators and lack a Greek equivalent in the manuscripts. The article is in the feminine and thus many translators render this phrase, “*she* who is in Babylon.” The debate focuses on whether a specific sister is referenced or whether it is the collective church that sends their greetings.



Peter, who wrote to those at Babylon, being freed from Prison.

Proponents of the reference being to a single sister note the similar construction in 2 John 1:1, “The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth.”

As we learn from 1 Corinthians 9:5 and Mark 1:30, Peter was married and apparently his wife often traveled with him. The general thought among those who believe the greeting comes from an individual is that this female individual refers to Peter’s wife. However, such evidence is highly con-
 jec-

tural and the weight of authority seems to favor the thought suggested in the Authorized Version, “the church that is in Babylon.”

WHERE IS BABYLON?

Three possibilities exist as to the identification of this Babylon:

(1) The city of “Babylon” in Egypt founded by Babylonians and laying south of Heliopolis, on the east bank of the Nile River.

(2) The actual famed city and district of “Babylon” on the Euphrates River in Chaldea.

(3) “Babylon” was a symbolic name amongst the Jews for Rome.

There is little to suggest that the Babylon referred to was the one in Egypt. The only possible supporting evidence is the fact that John Mark (the Marcus of our verse) was said to have died in Alexandria in Egypt in the fourth year of Nero and was supposedly the founder of the church there. Alexandria is not far distant from the Egyptian Babylon and it is possible that Peter ministered with him there.

Bible scholars are about equally divided between the other two Babylons. There appears to be a slight tilt toward the Chaldean Babylon. Although there is no biblical record of Peter venturing there, neither is their scriptural evidence against it; as likewise there is no account of him being either in Rome or in Egypt.

Since Peter’s ministry was primarily to the Jews, as Paul’s was particularly to the Gentiles, the existence of a sizeable community of Jews remaining in the Chaldaic Babylon makes such a journey plausible. This visit would minister to the large Jewish population who did not return to Israel, but settled permanently in Babylon and the Persian Gulf regions after the captivity of Nebuchadnezzar. Although this community lay within the Parthian Empire hostile to Rome, the Jewish community in the Roman empire maintained ties with it in Peter’s day. The great commentary on the Law is called the *Babylonian Talmud*. Josephus considered the community of Jews in Babylon so important that he published a special edition of his histories for them. It must be noted, however, that this community never adopted the Greek language in which this epistle is authored. The *Babylonian Talmud*, is composed in a dialect neither Chaldaic nor Hebrew, but a mixture of both of these and of other dialects, “jumbled together in defiance of all the rules of composition or of grammar” (John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, “Talmud”).

IS ROME “BABYLON?”

The strong dislike of the Jews for their subjugation to Rome had given them ample reason to compare Rome to ancient Babylon. And indeed, various writings of the time show that they applied this name to the Italian capitol. Catholic tradition favors this identification with the city of Rome because it supports their contention that Peter served as the first bishop of Rome. Of itself, this tradition is not adequate reason to

reject the identification of Babylon with Rome. In fact, if this term does refer to Rome, it identifies that city with the hated Babylon of old. There is some scriptural support for this since 2 Timothy 4:11 implies that Mark spent some time in Rome with the Apostle Paul. It is not unreasonable that Peter may have made a trip there also.

If the Babylon to which Peter refers, however, is Rome, the question may reasonably be asked, “Why does not Paul also refer to it under this sobriquet?” The answer may lie in the religio-political situation of the times. If this letter is contemporaneous with Paul’s imprisonment there, it may have been reckless for Peter to boldly state his whereabouts when the term “Babylon” may have been well understood by his readers to refer to Rome.

MARK AND PETER

Peter refers to his companion as “Marcus my son.” This is almost certainly the John Mark who wrote the gospel of Mark. In the account of Peter’s imprisonment (Acts 12:6-12), Peter immediately proceeds to the house of Mark’s mother. Though he may have been aware of the prayer meeting going on there, it is more likely that he considered her home his home while in Jerusalem. This is suggestive of a close relationship between the two followers of the Lord.

As Luke’s gospel is widely considered to be inspired by Paul, so Mark’s account is usually felt to be based on Peter’s recollections. After the separation of Paul and Barnabas over John Mark (Acts 15:39), it is assumed that Mark identified more with Peter than with Paul and served as his secretary.

Papias, a Christian of the late second century and historian of the early church, writes: “Mark, who was Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately though not in order, all that he collected of what Christ had said or done. For he was not a hearer of the Lord or a follower of his; he followed Peter, as I have said, at a later date, and Peter adapted his instructions to practical needs, without any attempt to give the Lord’s words systematically. So Mark was not wrong in writing down some things in this way from memory, for his one concern was neither to omit or to falsify anything he had heard.”

Mark may well have been more learned than Peter since he, as a Levite, would have had more formal schooling. His Levitical background is attested to by his being a nephew of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10).

While the term “my son” may only be an appellation of affection, it probably connotes a deeper spiritual relationship. As Paul’s similar relationship with Timothy (1 Timothy 1:18) denoted a mentorship and, possibly, a role in the conversion of that disciple, so Peter may have had a hand in Mark becoming a disciple or, at the least, of being his spiritual mentor. It was in a similar vein that Paul had a relationship with the mother of Rufus (Romans 16:13), very likely the wife of Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus (Mark 15:21). Thus it is, that from even a simple account of greetings, there are hidden beauties of the truth to be learned.

— Carl Hagensick