

# OVERCOMING THE DEGRADATION OF THE CHURCH BY EATING THE HIDDEN MANNA TO BE TRANSFORMED INTO WHITE STONES FOR GOD'S BUILDING

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The epistle to the church in Pergamos was written two thousand years ago, yet its relevance has not diminished with the passage of time. In fact, the same problems facing the church in Pergamos continue to plague the church today, and thus, the Spirit continues to sound forth a call for believers to overcome Pergamos's characteristic form of degradation. Regrettably, the true significance of the Lord's speaking to the church in Pergamos is lost on most believers. By failing to consider this epistle from the perspective of God's eternal economy—God's plan to impart Himself in Christ as life into the believers for the producing of the church as His dwelling place, His corporate expression—most commentators have missed the root cause of, and thereby the intrinsic remedy to, Pergamos's decline as well as the final goal for the overcoming believers. The key lies in two crucial rewards promised to the overcomers—the hidden manna and a white stone—which together encapsulate the entire biblical revelation concerning life and building. According to the divine thought in the book of Revelation and in the entire Holy Scriptures, the believers are produced as overcomers, conquer the fallen condition of the church, and are transformed to become precious stones for the building up of God's eternal habitation by eating the Lord as the hidden manna, the bread of life.

Some commentaries do provide insight into certain facets of the church's decline—Pergamos's union with the world under Satan's rule, the teaching of Balaam as a teaching that produces idolatry and fornication, and the teaching of the Nicolaitans as a teaching that promotes religious hierarchy. However, few commentators have seen the eating of the hidden manna as the organic antidote to the problems in Pergamos, nor have they seen that the building up of the church as the temple of God is the ultimate objective of the believers' overcoming.

## The Church Married to the World

The Lord Jesus begins His epistle to the church in Pergamos by exposing her affiliation with Satan, God's enemy and adversary: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is...among you, where Satan dwells" (Rev. 2:13). The place where Satan dwells and the place where Satan's throne is refer to the world, for Satan is "he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4) and is "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 16:11). In this context the world refers to an evil, anti-God system arranged by Satan to occupy people for the formation of his kingdom and to hinder them from loving God and accomplishing His purpose (1 John 2:15-17). In the apostle John's view, "the whole world lies in the evil one," remaining in the sphere of his pernicious influence and under his insidious usurpation and manipulation (5:19). This indicates that Satan's throne, which is associated with his kingdom, is in the world, the place of his dwelling and the sphere of his reign. In Revelation 2:13 the Greek word translated "dwell"

(κατοικεῖς) may be translated “dwell in, settle in, be established in (permanently), or inhabit” (Strong 2730). This implies that the church in Pergamos was established in the world, where Satan’s dwelling and throne are, and thus became subject to the infiltration of the world as Satan’s kingdom into the church.

Numerous commentators concur that the church in Pergamos signifies the church from the early part of the fourth century, when Constantine the Great, the Caesar of the Roman Empire, embraced Christianity as the principal religion, to the latter part of the sixth century, when the papal system was instituted. In the first three centuries of the church’s existence, Satan sought to annihilate the church through persecution by the Roman Empire. When this persecution failed, Satan in his craftiness transfigured himself from “a roaring lion” into “an angel of light” and changed his strategy of attack against the church from oppressing her outwardly as a murderer to deceiving her inwardly as a tempter (1 Pet. 5:8; 2 Cor. 11:3, 14; John 8:44; Matt. 4:3; 1 Thes. 3:5) in order to corrupt her, making her into “a world-institution” (Gaebelein 37). At the beginning of the fourth century Satan instigated Constantine to accept Christianity as the primary religion, to provide it with security, support, and wealth and even to preside over its doctrinal disputes. Constantine did this in an attempt to “weld his Christian and pagan subjects into one people, and so consolidate his Empire” (Hains 53). Under Constantine’s promotion of Christianity, multitudes of false Christians—motivated by their greed for the riches and favors promised by the emperor to converts—were baptized and flocked into “the church.” As a consequence, Satan sowed tares (the false believers) in the midst of the wheat (the true believers), thereby producing a profane mixture of the church with the world (Matt. 13:24-26; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-17).

The two meanings of Pergamos (Πέργαμω), “marriage” and “high tower,” prefigure this unholy union of the church and the satanic world. The Greek word Πέργαμω may be a compound word composed of the preposition περὶ (“around”) and the noun γάμος (“marriage”); this combination of “around” and “marriage” implies intensification, thus connoting “thoroughly married” or a complete marriage (Constable 38). Instead of condemning the world, which rejected and crucified her Beloved, the church as prefigured by the church in Pergamos loved the world and entered into an unlawful matrimony with the world. In the Gospel of John the Lord Jesus told the disciples that because He chose them out of the world, the world, which loves its own, would hate them and persecute them, even as it hated and persecuted Him (15:18-25). “If the world has not persecuted the Christians, it must be for one of the two following reasons: either the world has become the church, or the church has become the world” (Nee 371). Sadly, the latter is the case. The world does not honor and esteem Christ, but after a lengthy period of “romance,” the church has been wedded to the world so thoroughly that the world no longer vehemently hates or persecutes the majority of the believers in the church, because the church is fully one with the world.

Pergamos (Πέργαμω) may also have been derived from πύργος, which means “a tower; a fortified structure rising to a considerable height” (Thayer 558). This indicates that the church is not only married to the world but also made visible to and exalted by the world, even though “that which is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). The church, which was once despised, considered to be composed of pests, fools, the insane, and the scum and offscouring of the world, has become “a high tower,” receiving a warm reception, lofty positions, material riches, and political power in the world (Acts 24:5; 26:24; 1 Cor. 4:10, 13). The church in Pergamos as a high tower corresponds to the great tree prophesied by the Lord in the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32. Just as a seed of mustard, a small annual herb that produces food, was transmogrified into an enormous tree firmly rooted in the earth, a perennial plant in whose branches the birds of heaven roosted, so also the church, which as a crop produced food for the satisfaction of God and man, has been

transmuted into a monstrosity great religion, a lodging place of Satan, his evil spirits, and evil persons motivated by them (vv. 4, 19). As a consequence, the church is deeply rooted and settled in the world, thereby losing her sojourning and pilgriming nature. The believers in the church were no longer strangers and sojourners on the earth like Abraham, their father of faith, who made his home in tents and eagerly awaited the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city designed and built by God (Heb. 11:9-10, 13-16); instead, they became citizens of the world like Lot, who forsook the life of the tent and settled on the earth (Gen. 19:1).

**T**he church's unlawful marriage with the world is exceedingly serious, for it defies the admonition of both the Lord Jesus and the apostles that the believers maintain separation from the world. The Lord prayed that although the disciples were in the world, they would be separated from the world by being sanctified in God's word, the truth (John 17:14-17). Similarly, the apostle Paul boasted uniquely in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world had been crucified to him and he to the world (Gal. 6:14). He exhorts the believers to not be fashioned according to the age of the world but to be transformed into the image of Christ, and he unveils that since the believers died with Christ from the elements of the world, they should not walk according to the elements of the world but according to Christ (Rom. 12:2; 8:29; cf. Eph. 2:2; Col. 2:8, 20). Paul also testified that part of his commission as a minister of Christ was to turn people from the authority of Satan, the world as the kingdom of Satan, to the authority of God, the church as the kingdom of God (Acts 26:18; cf. Col. 1:13). In a similar vein, the apostle Peter asserts that the believers need to "become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption which is in the world by lust" (2 Pet. 1:4) and that they need to escape the defilements of the world by the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ lest they be entangled in these and be defeated (2:20). Moreover, the apostle John instructs the believers to not love the world nor the things in the world lest the love for the Father be not in them (1 John 2:15), and he reveals that regenerated believers, who through faith have been begotten of God and have received His eternal life, have the divine capacity to overcome the satanic world (4:4-5). Given the stern and repeated warning in the New Testament against the intrusion of the world into the church, it is utterly shameful that, instead of overcoming the world and transferring people out of the world into the church through the preaching of the gospel, the church in Pergamos was defeated by the world and became a place for the world, making her home in the world and thus being joined to Satan in his evil, anti-God system, which opposes and replaces the proper church.

In the Lord's eyes, the union between the church and the world is abominable because of His desire to gain the church as a genuine and pure testimony of Himself. Revelation 19:10 says that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of the prophecy" in the book of Revelation. This indicates that the substance and extract of the prophecy in this book is the testimony of Jesus, the church as His corporate expression. In particular, Revelation unveils that the church as the testimony of Jesus is a golden lampstand and the wife of the Lamb (1:12; 19:7). First, the church should be a pure golden lampstand, which consummates in the New Jerusalem as an eternal golden lampstand, a city of light that shines with the glory of God in the Lamb as the lamp and is "pure gold, like clear glass" (21:18, 23). According to Exodus 25:31-39, every part of a lampstand, except its wick, was made of "pure gold," indicating that gold was the unique substance of the lampstand and that in the lampstand there was no dross, no mixture. Gold signifies the eternal, incorruptible nature of God (2 Pet. 1:4). Hence, the church as a pure golden lampstand, a miniature of the New Jerusalem, must be divine in nature without any worldly mixture.

Second, the church as the testimony of Jesus is His chaste bride. The church as a pure virgin has been betrothed to Christ as to one husband in order to be His bride, the wife

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of the Lamb, for His satisfaction in love (John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2). As such, the church should maintain “the simplicity and the purity toward Christ” and love Him with her first love, her bridal love toward Him, until she is fully sanctified by the washing of the water in Christ’s word in order to be presented to Him as His holy, glorious, spotless, unblemished, and pure counterpart (v. 3; Eph. 5:26-27). However, the church not only left the Lord as her first love but also married the world for her profit. In so doing, she committed spiritual fornication, deeply grieving the Lord. This dreadful degradation of the worldly church reaches its nadir in Babylon the Great, the mother of the harlots and the great harlot, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication (Rev. 17:1-5), whereas the beautification of the proper church as a pure virgin consummates in the New Jerusalem, the holy bride adorned for her husband to the delight of His heart (21:2). The New Jerusalem, the pure wife of the Lamb, is the holy city, which is utterly separated from anything common or worldly (signified by its great and high wall) (v. 12) and which is solidly built with the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (signified by gold, pearls, and precious stones) (vv. 18-21). In stark contrast, Babylon the Great, the great harlot, is a detestable mixture of the divine things of the Triune God with the evil things of Satan. Although she is gilded with gold, pearls, and precious stones, her golden cup is full of abominations and the unclean things of her fornication (17:4).

### The Teaching of Balaam

The worldliness of the church in Pergamos opened the door for evil teachings, including the teaching of Balaam, to make inroads into the church. In Revelation 2:14 the Lord rebuked the church in Pergamos: “I have a few things against you, that you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat idol sacrifices and to commit fornication.” Balaam was a Gentile prophet who “loved the wages of unrighteousness” and thus plotted to cause the people of God to fall into fornication and idolatry (2 Pet. 2:15). According to Deuteronomy 7:1-3, God charged His people to be separated from the nations in the land of Canaan and to not make marriage alliances with them. Further, in Numbers 23:9 Balaam, while beholding the children of Israel, was inspired by God to utter a prophecy of blessing concerning them: “Here is a people who live alone / And do not reckon themselves among the nations.” This prophecy indicates that the Israelites were a unique, holy, and sanctified people, a people set apart from the nations unto God. However, driven by his greed, Balaam, who signifies religion, counseled Balak, the king of Moab, who signifies politics, to induce the Israelites to commit fornication with the daughters of Moab (31:16; 25:1). The Moabite women invited the Israelites “to the sacrifices of their gods,” the idols of the Moabite women, and the Israelites “ate and bowed down to their gods” (v. 2). As a result, Israel “joined itself to Baal-peor” (v. 3)—“the god of fornication,” a pagan idol (Lee, *Life-study of Numbers* 266)—and they “ate sacrifices offered to the dead” (Psa. 106:28). Consequently, “the anger of Jehovah was kindled against Israel” (Num. 25:3). This indicates that although the Israelites as God’s holy people should have been separated from the Gentile nations (Exo. 19:6), they were instead enticed to commit fornication and idolatry through the evil counsel of Balaam, producing an evil mixture of the children of Israel and the women of Moab. Similarly, even though the church as the holy nation and temple needed to be set apart for God from the world, she was instead seduced to commit spiritual idolatry and fornication and was thus wedded to the world through the teaching of Balaam (1 Cor. 3:17; 1 Pet. 2:9).

**I**n 1 John 5:21 the apostle John admonishes the believers to guard themselves from idols. Here *idols* does not refer merely to physical objects, such as graven images or stone figures; it refers to all vain substitutes for the true and living God, which usurp the place of preeminence in the believers’ heart, a heart that is to be reserved for God. In Ezekiel 14:3-8 Jehovah sorrowfully spoke concerning the children of Israel who set

up their idols in their heart and thus were estranged from Him because of all their idols. If we love anyone or anything more than the Lord Jesus and allow that person or thing to occupy our heart—whether it be the world or mammon—it is an idol that replaces the Lord in our life and must be renounced (cf. Matt. 6:24).

In the Bible idolatry and fornication often go together. In 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul exhorts the believers to flee from both idolatry and fornication (10:14; 6:18). When the believers partake of idol sacrifices, that is, “evil, devilish, and demonic things,” which are false substitutes for the Lord, they disregard the name of the Lord, that is, deviate from the person of the Lord (cf. Rev. 2:13) (Lee, *Life-study of Revelation* 147). This causes them to practice spiritual fornication, that is, have another husband, another source of enjoyment, in addition to the Lord, who is the unique Husband to all the believers.

### The Teaching of the Nicolaitans


Immediately after rebuking the church in Pergamos for holding the teaching of Balaam in Revelation 2:14, the Lord Jesus said in verse 15, “In the same way you also have some who hold in like manner the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” The expression *in the same way* connects verse 15 with the preceding verse, indicating that just as the Lord condemns the teaching of Balaam, so also He condemns the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Although there are different interpretations of the significance of the teaching of the Nicolaitans, a number of expositors have interpreted this teaching as a doctrine concerning religious hierarchy. This interpretation is based upon the meaning of the Greek word translated “Nicolaitans” (Νικολαϊτῶν): this word is derived from the Greek word for *conquer* or *domineer* (νίκος) and that for *common people*, or *laity* (λαός). C. I. Scofield states that “there is no ancient authority for a *sect* of the Nicolaitans” and that “if the word is symbolic it refers to the earliest form of the notion of a priestly order, or ‘clergy,’ which later divided an equal brotherhood (Mt. 23. 8), into ‘priests’ and ‘laity’” (1332). In *The Seven Churches of Revelation* Edmont Hains echoes this notion, saying that “in substance, [the word *Nicolaitan*] means the ‘domineers of the people’” and that such a class of believers “separates the clergy from the people and destroys the equality of the brotherhood of the believers” (37). In *The Apocalypse: Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, Joseph A. Seiss, whom Hains commends as “the greatest commentator on the book of Revelation” (Hains 21), speaks of the Nicolaitans as “those who held to another system of ideas involving tyrannical lordship over the Church” (Seiss 71). In *Exploring Revelation: An Expository Commentary* John Phillips writes, “The problem at Pergamos is clericalism, setting up a separate caste in the church to officiate in matters religious. This seems to have been at the root of Nicolaitanism. That which was called a deed in the letter to Ephesus is accepted as a doctrine at Pergamos” (38).

*Nicolaitans* refers to a group of people who considered themselves superior to the common believers and then subdued them by forming a clerical hierarchy. The clergy-laity system is a hierarchical organization composed of two separate categories of people: the clergy, a class of professionals who are believed to possess certain spiritual knowledge, ability, power, and authority in the service of God, and the laity, the common believers, who are thought to lack these special spiritual privileges and thus ought to bear little to no spiritual responsibility. The Nicolaitans promoted themselves as a mediatorial class, through whom man could commune with God, implying that apart from them the laity could not approach or serve God directly. The priestly system in the Roman Catholic Church, the clerical system in the state churches, and the pastoral system in the independent churches are all manifestations of such a mediatorial class. “The essence of the teaching of the Nicolaitans is to monopolize all spiritual matters and to create hierarchies in the church” (Nee 404).

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In His epistle to the church in Ephesus, the Lord Jesus explicitly stated that He hates the works of the Nicolaitans. Because of this hatred, the Lord warned the church in Pergamos that He would come to make war with those who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:16). The Lord Jesus detests both the deeds and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans because they deny the Lord as the unique Head of the Body and destroy the organic function of the members of the Body. The hierarchical teaching of the Nicolaitans is contrary to the word of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. In 20:25-26 He said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant,” and in 23:8-10 He said, “But you, do not be called Rabbi, for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father, for One is your Father, He who is in the heavens. Neither be called instructors, because One is your Instructor, the Christ.”

**S**ince the clergy is a class of specialists in the service of God who exercise authority over the laity, the common believers, thereby conquering them, the clergy usurps the headship of the Lord Jesus, who is the unique Head, Teacher, Instructor, and Master of all the believers (Eph. 6:9; Col. 1:18). The teaching and the practice of religious hierarchy contradicts the teaching of the apostles concerning the believers’ equal status in the Body of Christ as “members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). The apostle Peter charges the elders to not lord it over the saints as the flock of God but to become patterns of the flock (1 Pet. 5:3), and the apostle Paul and his fellow apostles testified that they did not lord it over the saints’ faith but instead desired to labor for their joy (2 Cor. 1:24). Paul exhorts the believers to be subject to one another in the fear of Christ, who is the Head of the church (Eph. 5:21, 23). In Paul’s mind the believers should hold Christ as their unique Head and grow up into Him in all things, loving Him with the first love by giving Him the first place, the preeminence, in all things (Col. 1:18; 2:19; Eph. 4:15; cf. Rev. 2:4). In promoting the clergy as a mediatorial class, the teaching of the Nicolaitans severs the believers from Christ as the Head, thereby hindering the growth of the Body (Col. 2:19).

The works and the teaching of the Nicolaitans not only negate the headship of Christ but also nullify the function of the members of the Body of Christ. In Revelation the apostle John twice declares that through the redemption accomplished through Christ’s blood, we, the believers in Christ, have been made priests to God (1:6; 5:10). As such, all the genuine believers share the privilege of approaching and serving God directly, without the need of a mediatorial class. The believers in Christ can come to God through Christ Jesus in order to have direct fellowship with God (John 14:6; Heb. 10:22) and, as a priesthood, can offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5). Every believer is not only a priest but also a member of the one Body of Christ, not a member of the clergy or of the laity. Every member of the Body is a genuine gift given by the ascended Head to the Body (Eph. 4:7-8), and every member has a gift (spiritual ability), a special function, and a certain measure (1 Pet. 4:10; Rom. 12:4-6; 1 Cor. 14:31). Hence, each believer has the capacity and obligation to function according to his measure to contribute to the building up of the Body (vv. 26, 31; Eph. 4:16). The works and the teaching of the Nicolaitans are hateful to the Lord because they replace the other members of the Body by taking over their spiritual responsibilities, thereby nullifying the universal priesthood of all believers, suppressing the organic function of the saints, frustrating the building up of the Body of Christ, and destroying the Body by turning the organism of the Triune God into a hierarchical organization of human beings.

### **The Hidden Manna**

After the Lord Jesus rebuked the church in Pergamos for holding the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans, the Lord as the Spirit sounded a call for the believers

to overcome this degradation in Pergamos, promising to give them the hidden manna as a reward (Rev. 2:17). According to the context of the book of Revelation, this promise is being fulfilled today in the proper church life and will be realized in full in the coming kingdom. The overcomers receive hidden manna both in the coming age of the millennium as a reward and in the present age as a foretaste of the reward. The thought of having a foretaste in the present age is seen in the Lord's promise that He would "give" the overcomers in the church in Ephesus "to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God" (v. 7). In the Gospel of John the Lord Jesus declared that He is life and the true vine, a vine tree, and that the believers need to eat Him as the bread of life (14:6; 15:1; 6:35, 57). The tree of life thus signifies God in Christ as life to His people in the form of food (Gen. 2:9; John 1:4; 1 John 5:11-12). Strictly speaking, to eat of the tree of life in the Paradise of God refers to participation in Christ as the life supply in the New Jerusalem in its initial stage in the coming millennial kingdom, which is promised only to the overcoming believers, not to all the believers. This thought is in accordance with the principle that every reward promised to the overcomers in the seven churches is given to them in the millennial kingdom (Rev. 2:10, 26; 3:21). Nonetheless, Revelation unveils that what the overcoming believers will enjoy in the coming kingdom may be enjoyed as a foretaste today. For example, in Revelation 22:14 the Lord said, "Blessed are those who wash their robes that they may have right to the tree of life." The fact that this verse does not say, "Blessed *will be*" but says, "Blessed *are*" indicates that today every believer who washes his robe in the blood of the Lamb may partake of the blessing of eating the tree of life, participating in Him as the life supply, and thus enjoy a foretaste of the holy city, the New Jerusalem.

The principle of the present foretaste of the coming reward is also illustrated in the white garments. In 3:4-5 the Lord said, "You have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments, and they will walk with Me in white because they are worthy. He who overcomes will be clothed thus, in white garments." Garments signify one's walk and living (19:8; Jude 23; Zech. 3:3-5), and since white signifies purity and approvedness, white garments signify the walk and living that are unspotted by death and that will be approved by the Lord. The word *thus* in Revelation 3:5 links verse 5 with the preceding verse, indicating that an overcomer's being clothed in white garments in the coming millennial age is predicated upon the fact that he has not defiled his garments in the present age, thereby being proved to be worthy of walking with the Lord in white. The wearing of white garments as a present enjoyment is further confirmed by the Lord's counsel to the believers in the church in Laodicea that in the present age they buy from Him white garments that they may be clothed and that the shame of their nakedness may not be manifested (v. 18). If we apply this principle to the hidden manna, we will realize that our being rewarded with the hidden manna in the coming age depends upon our eating it in the present age. In other words, in order for the believers to eat the hidden manna in the coming kingdom, they must eat it in the church today.

### *The Spiritual Significance of the Hidden Manna*

In the Bible manna is a type of Christ as spiritual food for God's people to be their daily life supply for their Christian journey. In John 6, when the Jews said to the Lord Jesus that their fathers ate the manna in the wilderness as "bread out of heaven" (v. 31), the Lord spoke of Himself as the reality of the manna—"the true bread out of heaven" and "the living bread which came down out of heaven" (vv. 32, 51). Although many expositors interpret manna as a type of Christ as the living bread, few adequately explore the deeply organic significance of this subject, failing to highlight the profound truth in John 6 that in order to impart Himself as the bread of life into the believers, Christ needed to pass through incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection to be transfigured into the life-giving Spirit and embodied in the word of eternal life. In accordance with His express purpose of coming to the earth that we may have life and have it abundantly (10:10), the Lord spoke of Himself as the "bread of God," the One

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who “comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world” (6:33). In order for Him to give life to the world, the Lord died on the cross, shedding His precious blood from His sinless body to accomplish redemption. Moreover, in resurrection He was transfigured from the flesh, which profits nothing, into “the Spirit who gives life” so that through the believers’ eating His flesh and drinking His blood, that is, through their receiving Him, He would abide in them as the Spirit to be their life and life supply (vv. 53, 56, 63). Today the resurrected and ascended Lord as the bread of life is embodied in and conveyed through His words that are spirit and life (v. 63). To eat the Lord as the true manna, we must receive Him as the life-imparting Spirit by feeding on His words (Jer. 15:16; Matt. 4:4; 1 Pet. 2:2).

**T**he reward promised to the overcomers in the church in Pergamos is not open manna but hidden manna. Open manna was sent by God for the Israelites to gather in the wilderness for their sustenance, whereas the hidden manna was a portion of manna preserved in a golden pot concealed within the Ark of the Testimony, which was in the Holy of Holies within the tabernacle (Exo. 16:32-34; Heb. 9:4). The former signifies Christ as the common portion of all of God’s people—a portion that is public—whereas the latter signifies the hidden Christ as a particular portion for His overcoming seekers who conquer the degradation of the church married to the world. While many believers in the degraded church return to the world (signified by Egypt), indulging in various forms of worldly entertainment (signified by the Egyptian diet) and in evil and devilish things (signified by the idol sacrifices), the overcomers come forward to abide in the deep intimacy of the direct presence of God in their regenerated spirit (signified by the Holy of Holies), where they enjoy Christ as a hidden portion for their daily supply in the most subjective way (4:12, 16; 10:22). These overcomers know what it means to enter into a “private room” and pray to their Father who is in secret and sees in secret (Matt. 6:6). They do not crave position in the world or recognition before men. Instead, they spend personal time with the Lord in order to nurture a secret, profound, and mysterious enjoyment of Him and have their spiritual life hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).

### *Eating the Hidden Manna to Overcome the Degradation of the Worldly Church*

We need to eat Christ as the hidden manna in order to overcome the various aspects of the degraded church that are joined to the world. The root cause of the degradation of the church is that believers are distracted by devilish teachings from the pure enjoyment of the all-inclusive Christ as the life supply. In the seven epistles to the churches in Asia, the Lord Jesus condemned religious teachings—the teaching of Balaam, the teaching of the Nicolaitans, the teaching by Jezebel, and the teaching of the deep things of Satan—and exhorted the believers to eat Him as their spiritual food—the tree of life, the hidden manna, and the feast of the produce of the good land (Rev. 2:14-15, 20, 24, 7, 17; 3:20; cf. Josh. 5:10-12). In so doing, the Lord was seeking to turn the believers from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which signifies Satan as the source of death to man, to the tree of life, which signifies God in Christ as the source of life. Eating Christ as the food supply is the unique and intrinsic remedy to every ailment afflicting the degraded church.

To counteract the evil teachings held by the church in Pergamos, the Lord Jesus did not present a superior teaching but promised to nourish the believers with Himself as the hidden manna. By feeding on the Lord as the hidden manna, the believers may overcome the deformed facets of the church. By partaking of the Lord as the hidden manna, the believers can conquer the church’s union with Satan and the world. If we eat the Lord as the hidden manna by enjoying His sanctifying word, we will spontaneously be separated from the world and the things in the world unto the holy God and His eternal purpose (John 17:11, 14-17), because the Lord is the One who declared, “I have overcome the world” (16:33). If we eat the Lord as the hidden manna in our personal fellowship



with Him, He, as the unique Overcomer, will be constituted into us and reproduced in us to make us overcomers who reign in life over the world and Satan (Rom. 5:17).

If the believers conquer Satan and the world, their victory will close the door to the teaching of Balaam, the teaching of spiritual idolatry and fornication, and to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, the teaching of the clergy-laity hierarchy. As we partake of Christ as the hidden manna by feeding on the guileless milk of the word, we will taste the Lord in His goodness and pleasantness, thereby losing a taste for all the vain, idolatrous substitutes for Christ (1 Pet. 2:2-3). When we enjoy Christ as the hidden manna in private, intimate, and affectionate contact with Him, we will no longer yearn for idols, other “husbands”; we will instead love Him as our unique Husband with the first love, the bridal love, in purity and simplicity (2 Cor. 11:2-3; cf. Hosea 2:2, 16-17; Phil. 3:7-8). Further, as we partake of Christ as the hidden manna by enjoying His instant, present, and living word, He will sanctify us by washing us of our blemishes, that is, any foreign elements in us—anything other than Himself—and by imparting His holy and glorious element into us for our beautification (Eph. 5:26). Through Christ’s purifying and beautifying word, we will be freed from worldly mixture, rescued from committing spiritual harlotry, and adorned as a pure, holy, and glorious bride for our Husband.

**I**t is also by feasting on Christ as the hidden manna that the believers can overcome the Nicolaitan system of the clergy and laity as a mediatorial class. When the believers eat Christ as the hidden manna in the Father as the golden pot within their regenerated spirit as the Holy of Holies, they enjoy direct fellowship with Him and partake of the sweetest, deepest, and innermost supply of life, beholding and reflecting His glory with an unveiled face, receiving mercy and finding grace from the throne of grace, and learning the desire of His heart through His speaking from between the cherubim of glory (2 Cor. 3:18; Heb. 4:16; 9:5; Exo. 25:22). These believers know with full assurance of understanding that they are to commune with God and serve Him without relying on a mediatorial class. Moreover, eating Christ as the hidden manna enables the believers to serve as priests to God. In Exodus 16:32-33 God instructed Moses to keep an omerful of the manna in a golden pot, and according to verse 36, “an omer is a tenth of an ephah.” In *Life-study of Exodus*, Witness Lee provides insight concerning the spiritual significance of an omer being the tenth part of an ephah:


The tenth part denotes a special portion that was reserved for the priesthood. This indicates that the hidden manna was not for the congregation in general, but for the serving priests in particular...Without the hidden manna, we shall not be able to function as priests...

If you eat the open manna, this manna will become the hidden manna which enables you to function in the church life. Thus, the more you eat of Christ, the more function you will exercise. In this way you will become a priest in reality and practicality. (453)

In *The Scriptural Way to Meet and to Serve for the Building Up of the Body of Christ* Witness Lee states, “The way to overcome the practice and teaching of hierarchy is eat the hidden Jesus. As we eat Jesus in a hidden way, He becomes our energy of life within to overcome the deeds and teaching of the Nicolaitans” (160). The New Testament clearly reveals that the believers’ service as priests and their function to minister Christ to others for the building up of His Body rest upon their participation in Christ as their life supply. In 1 Timothy 4:6 Paul exhorts Timothy to be “a good minister of Christ Jesus, being nourished with the words of the faith.” This verse implies that “to minister Christ to others requires that first we ourselves be nourished with the words of life concerning Christ” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 6, note 2). The believers can serve as a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by partaking of the milk of the word and tasting the Lord (1 Pet. 2:1-5). This means that the source of our service as priests comes out of receiving life through our enjoyment of the Lord in the milk of the word. In Revelation 22:1-3, immediately after speaking of the tree

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of life producing twelve fruits and yielding its fruit each month, the apostle John says, “His slaves will serve” God and the Lamb. Here the Greek word translated “serve” (λατρεύσουσιν) denotes serving as priests in the way of worship and ministry. This indicates that in eternity future what empowers the believers to serve God as priests, apart from any manifestation of human hierarchies, is the rich supply of the divine life that they obtain from eating Christ as the tree of life and as the hidden manna.

### *Eating the Hidden Manna to Be Incorporated with the Triune God*

Eating Christ as the hidden manna not only enables the believers to conquer the decline in the worldly church but also incorporates them with the Triune God for the consummation of the New Jerusalem as an eternal mutual abode of God and man, in which God dwells in man and man in God. In John 6:56, shortly after revealing Himself as the heavenly manna, the Lord Jesus said, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him.” This verse suggests that by eating Christ as the hidden manna the believers are mingled with Christ and mutually abide with Him, thereby being incorporated with Him. *Incorporation* refers to persons in a relationship of coinherence, that is, persons dwelling in one another. The three of the Divine Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—are a divine incorporation because They mutually indwell one another. In John 14:10 the Son reveals that the Father and the Son are incorporated by coinhering mutually: “I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.” The Son brought the Triune God as this divine incorporation into humanity through His incarnation and then brought humanity into God through His death and resurrection so that His redeemed elect might be ushered into a universal, divine-human incorporation of the processed Triune God with the regenerated believers. For this the Son prayed, “Even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us” (17:21). The Son similarly prophesied that on the day of His resurrection this enlarged, universal, divine-human incorporation would be realized: “In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (14:20). The expression *I am in My Father* unveils that the Son dwells in the Father and has been incorporated into Him. This testifies to the eternal existence of the Triune God as a divine incorporation. The expressions *you in Me* and *I in you* reveal that the Son and the regenerated believers also dwell in each other and have been incorporated into one. By virtue of the believers’ coinherence with the Son, who coinheres with the Father, the believers also coinhere with the Father by being incorporated with the Father in the Son. This testifies to the existence of a universal, divine-human incorporation.

The revelation concerning this incorporation is signified by the hidden manna in the tabernacle. The hidden manna in the Ark signifies Christ the Son as the hidden supply of life, and the golden pot signifies God the Father with His divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). Christ as the hidden manna exists in a state of incorporation. The manna was concealed in a golden pot, signifying that Christ the Son is hidden in God the Father (Col. 3:3-4); the golden pot was placed in the Ark of the Testimony, signifying that the Father is in Christ; and the Ark was located in the Holy of Holies, signifying that Christ as the Spirit is in the believers’ mingled spirit. When we eat Christ as the hidden manna, we are mingled with and incorporated into the Son, who is in the Father, who is in the Son, who as the Spirit is in our mingled spirit. By feeding on Christ as the hidden manna, we are brought into the reality of the universal, divine-human incorporation of the processed Triune God with the regenerated believers. Today the believers face two choices: we may eat Christ as the hidden manna and thus be incorporated with the Triune God to become His mutual dwelling place, or we may eat idol sacrifices, taking in idols, and thus be joined to Satan to become part of the world, his evil system.

### *Eating the Hidden Manna to Become Proper Material for God's Dwelling Place*

The believers need to partake of Christ as the hidden manna not merely for their

individual spiritual growth but for the building up of the church as God's corporate dwelling place. This thought is illustrated by the fact that the building of the tabernacle as God's sanctuary was dependent upon the Israelites' partaking of manna as their daily life supply. Although the Israelites made their exodus from Egypt, which signifies the world, they were constituted with the element of Egypt, as evidenced by their longing for Egyptian food, and were Egyptian in their thinking and thus were not qualified to build the tabernacle (Num. 11:6). For forty years God gave the Israelites only manna out of heaven for their reconstitution with a heavenly element (Exo. 16:35; Num. 11:6). Similarly, even though the believers have been delivered out of the world (Col. 1:13), many are still constituted with a worldly element, longing for the things in the world. God's intention in His salvation is not merely to change His people's outward behavior; it is to change their inward nature by feeding them with Christ as their unique, heavenly food, reconstituting them with Christ in order to qualify them to build up, and become, the church as His habitation. We need to enjoy Christ as the hidden manna, eating Him and assimilating Him into our being, in order to be reconstituted with Him so that we may become the proper material for the church as the dwelling place of God.

In order for the believers to be the church as the dwelling place of God, the house of God, they need to be the reproduction of Christ by being constituted with Him, who is the unique element of the church. By feeding on Christ as the hidden manna, the believers partake of the divine nature to become material that is suitable for the building up of the church as God's dwelling place.

### A White Stone with a New Name

Immediately after promising to give an overcomer the hidden manna, the Lord Jesus promised to give him a white stone, revealing that He as the hidden manna, the heavenly life supply, is for the building up of the church as God's house built with the believers as precious stones. In the Bible a stone signifies transformed material for God's building, and white signifies justification and approvedness, indicating that overcomers as stones will be justified and approved by the Lord (Rev. 3:4-5, 18; 19:14). By virtue of our first birth, we are men of clay, for man was formed of clay, the dust of the ground (Rom. 9:21; Gen. 2:7; 1 Cor. 15:47). However, through our second birth, we have received the life of God with its divine nature, and through our continual participation in Christ as our life supply, this divine life grows within us, thereby transforming us into living stones, precious stones (John 3:6; 2 Cor. 3:18). By eating Christ as the hidden manna, we are transformed in our soul into white stones, that is, living stones, which are solid, of high value, and full of life (1 Pet. 2:4-5). In our natural being we are worthless clay, but through the regeneration of our spirit and the transformation of our soul, we become precious stones constituted with Christ as the supreme preciousness of God (1 Cor. 3:12; 1 Pet. 2:7).

According to Revelation 2:17, upon the white stone a new name will be written, which no one knows except him who receives it. A new name speaks of both a transformed person and the personal experiences associated with his transformation, that is, his spiritual biography based upon his history with the Lord who has been wrought into the depths of his being for God's building. That no one knows the new name written on the white stone except the one who receives the stone indicates that the experiences that produce transformation are unique, particular, and personal between the believer and the Lord. Such distinctive names, which are given by the Lord, signify the special "*characteristics* and *virtues* which the Lord's eyes notice and which please Him," and the Lord's giving of a new name signifies the "*commendation and appreciation* of the nature and conduct of the ones receiving the name" (Nee 418). The Lord and each overcomer will delight in an eternal memorial of their precious experiences of Christ during their earthly sojourn—including every instance of their

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AND THUS BE JOINED  
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participation in the fellowship of His sufferings and their hidden tears shed before Him for His interest (Phil. 3:10; Acts 20:19; cf. Mal. 3:16; Psa. 56:8). This should motivate us to forsake every form of worldly pleasure, eat the Lord as the hidden manna, and seek to please only Him so that we may gain the imprimatur of His personal love for each of us.

### *Material for God's Building*

Although many expositors highlight the personal dimension of the overcoming believers' receiving a white stone with a new name written on it, few see the implications of the white stone being material for the church as God's organic building, His spiritual house. When Peter was first brought to the Lord Jesus, his name was changed from Simon to Cephas, "which is interpreted, Peter" (John 1:42). Both the Latinized Greek word *Cephas* (Κηφᾶς), which comes from the Aramaic word *kēphā*, and the Greek word translated "Peter" (Πέτρος) means "rock" or "stone." This indicates the Lord's intention to transform Simon into a stone for His building. Later, when Peter received the revelation from the Father that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus said to him, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). In so doing, the Lord revealed His intention to build the church as the house of God upon Himself and upon the revelation concerning Himself, as the rock, the foundation, with the believers as stones (1 Cor. 3:10-11). Based upon this revelation, Peter proclaims to the believers, "Coming to Him, a living stone, rejected by men but with God chosen and precious, you yourselves also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:4-5). According to these verses, Christ as a living stone and the believers who have become living stones as the reproduction of Christ are for the building up of the church as a spiritual house. The believers are not to be separated and scattered or even merely gathered and piled together; as living stones, they need to be built up with one another (joined, fitted, and knit together) to form a corporate house (Eph. 2:21-22; 4:16). The desire of God's heart and the goal of His salvation is not merely to redeem, regenerate, and transform the believers into living stones but ultimately to build them up into the church as the dwelling place of God in spirit for His expression, rest, and satisfaction (2:22).

**T**he goal of the overcoming believers' enjoyment of Him as the hidden manna and their transformation into white stones is the building up of God's temple. This goal is confirmed by the promise to the overcomers in Philadelphia—the promise of making him who overcomes a pillar in the temple of His God and of writing upon him the name of His God, the name of the New Jerusalem, and the new name of the Lord (Rev. 3:12). The overcoming believers as precious stones are built into the temple of God as supporting pillars, as irremovable components of the building. The temple of God in 3:12 refers to the church in the present age, the New Jerusalem in its preliminary stage in the millennial kingdom, and the New Jerusalem in its completed stage in the new heaven and the new earth for eternity. The overcomers not only receive a new name which no one else knows, but they also bear the new name of the Lord, indicating that the person of the Lord has been wrought into them and that they have been metabolically transformed into His image and saturated with His elements. Further, they bear the name of the New Jerusalem, indicating that they are parts of the holy city, the eternal habitation of God. By feeding on the Lord as the hidden manna, the overcoming believers are constituted with Him to be transformed into white stones, and they are built into the church, the temple of God, by being made pillars of the temple today, which will consummate in the New Jerusalem, the eternal dwelling place of God. In brief, God's work of building the church as His habitation depends on the believers' transformation into precious stones, and this transformation results from their participation in the Lord as the hidden manna, their life supply.

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## Life, Transformation, and Building Revealed in the Bible

The heart of the divine revelation in the Holy Scriptures is God's eternal intention to dispense Himself in Christ as life and life supply in order to transform His elect from men of clay into precious stones for the building up of His dwelling place. Three principal writers of the New Testament—John, Paul, and Peter—each present this revelation concerning life, transformation, and building. John 1:1-4 reveals that Christ, the Word of God, is the embodiment of the divine life, for “in Him was life” (v. 4). Verses 12 through 16 speak of the believers' initial receiving of Him to become the children of God and their continual receiving of His fullness and grace upon grace. In verse 42, at Peter's conversion, Christ changed his name from Simon to Cephas, which means “a stone,” thereby declaring His intention to transform a natural person into precious material for God's building. In verse 51 Christ unveiled the building of the house of God as the purpose of the stone when He said to Nathanael, “You shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” These words harken back to Jacob's dream recorded in Genesis 28:10-22. In this dream Jacob saw the ladder set up on the earth and leading to heaven (vv. 12-13). After he awoke from his sleep, Jacob poured oil upon a stone so that it might be the house of God, Bethel (vv. 16-19). This account reveals that the church as the house of God (signified by Bethel) is constructed with transformed believers (signified by a stone or stones) mingled with the Spirit (signified by the oil) through Christ as the Son of Man bringing God into man and man into God (signified by the ladder bringing heaven to earth and joining earth to heaven). Hence, John 1 unveils that through the believers' continual participation in Christ as the embodiment of life, they experience organic transformation into living stones to constitute the church as the house of God.

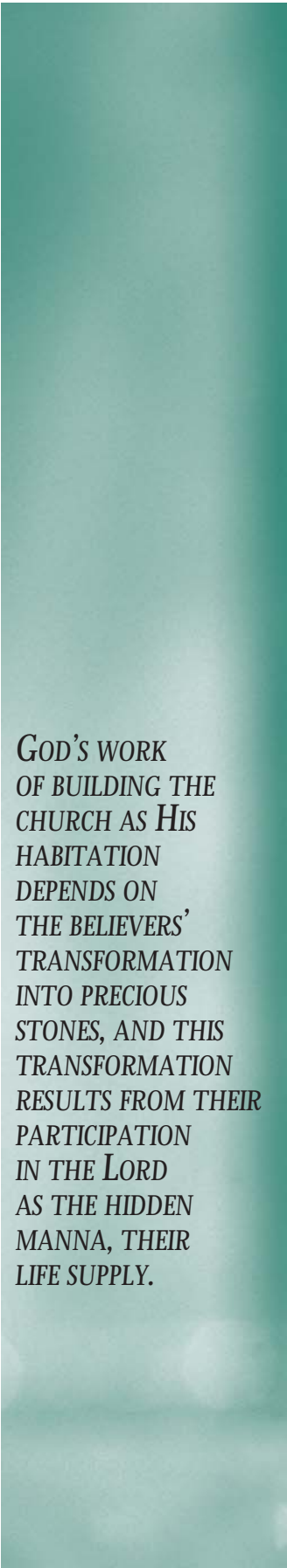
In 1 Corinthians 3 the apostle Paul as a minister of Christ testifies that he fed the believers with spiritual food either in the form of milk or solid food so that they might grow in life (vv. 2-8). Paul goes on to indicate that through the growth of Christ as life within them, they are transformed into suitable materials for God's building: gold, silver, and precious stones (vv. 6-12). In the same chapter Paul also reveals that the church is the building of God, the holy temple of God built upon Christ as the foundation and with the believers as gold, silver, and precious stones (vv. 9, 16-17). Thus, 1 Corinthians 3 unveils that the believers need to be nourished with Christ as spiritual food in order to grow in life and be transformed into precious stones for the building of the church as the holy temple of God.

First Peter 2 reveals that as the believers partake of the milk of the word, they taste the Lord by eating and enjoying Him (vv. 2-3) and that by feeding on Him as the milk of the word, they are “coming to Him, a living stone,” thereby being transformed into living stones and built up into the church as a corporate priesthood and a spiritual house (vv. 4-5).

**T**he revelation concerning Christ as the life supply transforming the believers into precious stones for God's building culminates in the New Jerusalem, the holy city built with the transformed believers as precious stones produced through their partaking of Christ as the tree of life (Rev. 21:18-22; 22:2, 14). The Lord's rewards to the overcomers in the church in Pergamos—the hidden manna (the nourishing life supply) and the white stone (the building material)—encapsulate the eternal purpose of God to impart Himself in Christ as life into the believers in order to produce them as proper materials for the building up of God's dwelling place, which consummates in the New Jerusalem. This is the intrinsic focus and heart of the Lord's epistle to the church in Pergamos.

### Conclusion

The degraded aspects of the church in Pergamos—its union with the world, spiritual



**GOD'S WORK OF BUILDING THE CHURCH AS HIS HABITATION DEPENDS ON THE BELIEVERS' TRANSFORMATION INTO PRECIOUS STONES, AND THIS TRANSFORMATION RESULTS FROM THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE LORD AS THE HIDDEN MANNA, THEIR LIFE SUPPLY.**

idolatry and fornication, and teachings concerning clerical hierarchy—are not merely historical facts for our contemplation but widespread issues affecting believers today, both on an individual and a corporate level. Thankfully, however, the Lord as the Spirit is determined to carry out God’s New Testament economy to its ultimate conclusion. He is still sounding forth the call for believers to overcome the degradation of the church married to the world, promising to give them the hidden manna and a white stone. The Lord promises to nourish the overcomers with Himself as the hidden manna in order to transform them into white stones for God’s building. This promise is fulfilled both in the present age as a special portion for the overcomers and in the coming millennium, when it will become their glorious prize in full. By eating Christ as the hidden manna, we not only rise above the pitfalls of the worldly church but also fulfill God’s intention to build up the church as His dwelling place in spirit. By partaking of Christ as the hidden manna and thereby being constituted with the One who overcame the world and judged its ruler, we too can reign in life over Satan and the world. By enjoying Christ as the hidden manna in a deeply personal and affectionate communion, we become willing to forsake every idol in our heart and love Him as our unique Husband with simplicity and purity, being His chaste and spotless bride. By feeding on Christ as the hidden manna, we are supplied with the riches of the divine life so that we may worship God and minister the riches of Christ to others without a mediatorial class, thereby tearing down the clergy-laity system and building up the organic Body of Christ. And by feasting on Christ as the hidden manna, we are transformed from worthless clay into precious stones to be built up as God’s spiritual house, being mingled and incorporated with the Triune God in Christ to become part of the New Jerusalem, a universal incorporation of God in man and man in God. May believers everywhere receive mercy from the Lord to hear and answer His call for overcomers to conquer the degradation of the worldly church by eating Christ as the hidden manna to be transformed into white stones so that the desire of God’s heart—to gain a mutual dwelling place for God and the believers for His and their rest and satisfaction—may finally be fulfilled. **AFC**

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