

PERGAMUM: FAITHFUL BUT TOLERANT OF HERESY

Revelation 2:12-17

I. BIBLICAL TEXT

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: **13** ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. **14** But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. **15** So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. **16** Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. **17** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.’

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A. LOCATION AND SIZE

- On the Selinus (Caicos) River
- 53 miles north of Izmir—16 miles east of Aegean Sea.
- Nearest modern city = Berghama
- Northernmost of 7 cities
- Population—200,000—at height of Roman era

B. POLITICAL HISTORY

- Originally a city of refuge for people of the plain—as name indicates
 - **πυργος**—means ‘fortified tower’
- Colonized by Arcadians—[center-east of Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece].
- First mentioned by Greek historian Xenophon—4th century BC
- Under Greeks—then Persians—then under Alexander the Great
- Rose to importance under Alexander’s successor—Lysimachus—king of Thrace—4th century
- Capital of Attalid kingdom—(281-133 BC)

- Established and consolidated after defeat of Celtic invasion from Galatia
- Covered most of southwestern and southcentral Asia Minor—1/3 of modern Turkey
- Cultural center—ruled benevolently over surrounding territory
- Allied with Rome and Rhodes
- Revolt against Rome led to division between Rome, Pontus, Cappadocia
- Rome took control of city and declared it a democracy—48 BC
 - Autonomous rule—but depended on Rome for protection
 - Briefly Roman capital of Asia—until transferred to Ephesus
- 716—Arabs captured city—began to decline
- Resettled 12th century—taken again by Turks in 13th century
- Occupied alternatively by Turkish Muslims and Greek Christians—finally by Muslims from 14th century

C. CULTURE AND TRADE

- School of medicine the 4th century BC—The Asclepeion
 - Survived for centuries and continued as spa into 2nd century AD
 - Galen (129-216 AD)—Greek physician was a native of the city.
- School of sculpture founded early 1st century BC
- Library founded early 1st century BC—rivalled Alexandrian library
 - Rivalled Alexandrian library
 - 200,000 volumes on parchment
 - Statue of Athena—goddess of wisdom—stood at entrance
- One of the strongest supporters of Hellenism in Roman era
- Commercial trade center
 - Agriculture
 - Silver mining
 - Textile industry
- Invented and exported parchment
 - Competed with Egyptian papyrus—produced in Alexandria—had a monopoly
 - When Egypt stopped shipping parchment to Pergamum
 - Parchment named for Pergamum—*charta pergamena*
 - Smooth taut sheets of sheep/goat skin
 - Parchment reduced Roman dependency on Egyptian papyrus
 - Allowed increased dissemination of knowledge throughout Europe and Asia
 - Greatly expanded holdings of the Library of Pergamum

D. PAGAN RELIGION

- Temples—Emperor Trajan, Athena, Dionysius, Demeter, and Hera

- Under Attalids—Zeus and Asclepius were main cults
- 29 BC Augustus allowed building of temple in his honor
- Became main center in the East for the Imperial Cult.
- Trajan and Hadrian contributed to renovation of temples in their honor

E. FACILITIES

1. Acropolis—modeled after the one in Athens
 - o Second in grandeur only to Athenian Acropolis
 - o Theater—seated 10,000
 - o Many temples—Emperor Trajan, Athena, Dionysius, Demeter, and Hera
 - o Library
 - o Royal palace
 - o Roman baths
 - o 3 gymnasiums
 - o Great Altar—115 x 100 feet—celebrated Attalid military victories [now in Berlin museum]
2. The Asclepium
 - o Sanctuary of Asclepius—god of healing
 - o 3 km from Acropolis in valley
 - o 820 meter colonnaded sacred way
 - o Sick people bathed in sacred spring—awaited vision from Asclepius telling how to be cured
3. Temple to Isis (Serapis)—known as the ‘Red Basilica’

III. PERGAMUM AND THE EARLY CHURCH

1. **Rev 2:12** says Antipas was martyred there
 - o Antipas—first Bishop of Pergamum—possibly ordained by John the Apostle
2. *Apostolic Constitutions* say Gaius of Third John became bishop of the city.
3. Attalus—martyred at Lyons under Marcus Aurelius—a native of Pergamus.
4. Bishop Theodotus about 150 opposed Gnostic sect of Colorbasiani
5. Eusebius says Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice were martyred in March 250.
6. Large percentage of its 120,000 inhabitants in 3rd century were Christians.
7. Bishops attended most of major councils through 9th century
8. Suffragan bishop under Ephesus until 12th century—when it became its own bishopric
9. Metropolitan title removed in 1387—diocese soon disappeared

IV. EXPOSITION

VERSE 12

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

❖ THE TWO EDGED SWORD

1. Again context of letter is set by identity of speaker
 - o John described the Lord this way in **1:16**
2. Like two-edged sword used by Roman soldiers in battle
3. Old Testament background—Isaiah’s descriptions of God
 - a. God as Judge

Is 11:4—*But with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with **the rod of His mouth**, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.*

- b. God As Servant
4. New Testament reference
 - o God’s word—divides truth from the false

Heb 4:12—*For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do*

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5. How Jesus will attack those who compromise the message of the church—**2:16**

VERSE 13

13 ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

A. SATAN’S THRONE

1. CIVIL RELIGION
 - o Pergamum—center of Roman government and pagan religion in Asia Minor
 - o First city to build a temple to Roman ruler—Augustus
 - o City was ‘temple warden’ of a temple dedicated to emperor worship

- o Like Ephesus was ‘temple warden’ of worship to Diana/Artemis

2. PAGAN WORSHIP

- a. Asclepius—the serpent god of healing
 - Symbol—serpent—clearly emblematic for John—symbolizing Satan
- b. Many other pagan temples
 - Zeus, Athene, Demeter, Dionysius
- c. Temple hill behind city
 - Conical hill—on which were many pagan temples
 - Throne-like altar to Zeus

B. FAITHFUL WITNESS

1. TWO AFFIRMATIONS

- o You hold fast
- o My witness, my faithful one

2. I KNOW WHERE YOU DWELL

- o Another acknowledgement of faithfulness
- o Though you are geographically at Satan’s throne
- o You are *still* the faithful one—willing to die
- o Even where Satan dwells—[implied] you have not served Him

C. IN THE DAYS OF ANTIPAS

1. ANTIPAS—IS A “FAITHFUL WITNESS”

- o Like Jesus—referencing [1:5](#)

2. REFERS TO EARLY CHRISTIAN MARTYR IN PERGAMUM

- o 92 AD—Antipas—first Bishop of Pergamum—possibly ordained by John the Apostle
- o Traditional history says—result of clash between Christians and worshipers of Serapis
- o Antipas burned alive inside Brazen Bull incense burner—represented the bull god Apis
- o Christian church met in area of Red Basilica in first century

VERSES 14-15

14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15 So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

A. PROBLEM: COMPROMISE DUE TO HERETICAL TEACHING

1. OPPOSITE PROBLEM OF EPHESUS
 - Ephesus—so strongly emphasized doctrinal purity that it lost first love for evangelizing
2. PERGAMUM RESISTED OUTSIDE PRESSURE OF EMPEROR WORSHIP AND PAGANISM
 - But compromised internally—allowing heresy to enter its ranks

B. TWO WRONGFUL PRACTICES INFILTRATING CHURCH

- ❖ EATING FOOD OFFERED TO IDOLS
- ❖ IMMORALITY--FORNICATION—[either spiritual or physical]

C. THE BALAAM PROBLEM

1. BACKGROUND—BALAAM
 - a. Biblical references—[Nu 22:5-25:3](#); [31:8, 16](#)
 - b. Story-line of Balaam
 - Pagan prophet hired by King Balak of Moab, to pronounce curse upon Israel
 - God prevented his cursing Israel—forced him to bless Israel
 - God threatened to kill Balaam with ‘the sword’ if he did not obey—[Nu 22:23, 31](#)
 - But later Balaam deceived Israel—for reward from Moabite king
 - Led some to defect and fornicate with Moabite women and worship pagan gods
 - God punished Israel with a plague until idolaters were exterminated
 - Balaam was later killed by ‘the sword’—when Israel defeated Midianites
 - See [Nu 31:8](#) and [Josh 13:22](#)
 - This same fate awaits those false teachers who mislead Pergamum—[2:16](#)
 - c. Balaam became symbol in Israel for:
 1. False teachers
 - Who, for money, encourage others to be unfaithful to God
 2. Immorality (fornication)

- Might *sometimes* be physical
- But always—idol worship—was viewed as spiritual fornication

2. PARALLEL IN PERGAMUM

- a. False teachers encouraged members to compromise their practices
 - To associate too closely with pagan culture
 - Similar situation in Thyatira—see [2:20](#)
- b. The Compromise
 1. Eating food offered to idols—probably eating it *in association with idol worship*
 2. Not just buying food at market that had previously been offered at pagan temples
- c. Historical Context
 1. Possibly participating in trade guilds—closely associated with civic identity
 2. Guilds held feasts honoring pagan gods—and maybe engaged in immoral activities
 3. Maybe church members participated in feasts to avoid social ostracism
 4. Their ‘immorality’ was probably spiritual—supporting idol worship—not physical
- d. Rationale of false teachers
 - It is all right to participate—and show civic loyalty
 - As long as the members did not really believe in the pagan gods
 - This would prevent threats of economic deprivation

C. THE NICOLAITAN PROBLEM—v15

1. Possibly another group who taught the same way

“some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans
2. Or maybe the **name** of the *same previous group* identified with Balaam’s heresy

VERSE 16

16 Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

1. Just like Balaam was judged by the sword—so will the false teachers be punished
2. Parallel passage—shows the Lord as the coming Judge
 - The coming Faithful and True one—will judge and wage war against those who oppose Him

Rev 19:15—*From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty*

VERSE 17

17 *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.*

A. TO HIM WHO OVERCOMES

1. What must be overcome—the temptation to compromise and follow false teachers
2. Who overcomes—those resist partaking in pagan feasts that honor pagan gods

B. THREE PROMISES

1. Hidden manna
2. White stone
3. New name written on the stone

C. HIDDEN MANNA

1. Contrasted to food received at pagan feasts
2. Obvious reference to better bread
 - o **Bread of God**—better than manna given through Moses—[Jn 6:32-33](#)
 - o **Bread of Life**—one will never hunger or thirst—[Jn 6:35](#)
3. Also—an allusion to
 - o Final marriage **supper of the Lamb**—[Rev 19:7-9](#)
 - o Refers *back* to—[2:7](#)—eating of the **Tree of Life**
 - o Refers *forward* to—[22:2](#)—**Tree of Life**—with 12 kinds of fruit—for healing of the nations

D. THE WHITE STONE

1. No clear—definitive—and singular meaning
2. Possible meanings:
 - o white stone cast for acquittal—black stone for guilt
 - o white stone sometimes was a pass/ticket for admission
 - So—possibly a pass for admission to Lamb’s marriage supper
 - o reinforces idea of ‘hidden manna’

- Manna resembled ‘white bdellium stones’—**Ex 16:31** and **Nu 11:7**
- white—symbolizing purity— of those who did not compromise and follow false teachers

E. NEW NAME

1. Written on the stone—which no one knows—but he who receives it
2. Probably refers to name in letter to Philadelphia

3:12—*And I will write on him the name of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name*

3. Name that identifies the people of God

22:3-4—*the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him; and they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads*

4. This ‘New Name’ promise given only to Pergamum and Philadelphia

- a. Each church has been faithful to the Lords’ name

- Pergamum—**2:13**—*you hold fast My name*
- Philadelphia—**3:3**—*have not denied My name*

- b. Each church is promised a new name

- Pergamum—**2:17**
- Philadelphia—**3:12**

5. New Name identifies the community of redeemed

- a. Alluded to by Isaiah

1. Describing the glory of Zion

Is 62:2—*The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will designate.*

2. Contrasting the Lord’s people with those who rebel against Him

Is 65:15—*You will leave your name for a curse to My chosen ones, and the Lord God will slay you. But My servants will be called by another name.*

- b. Fulfilled by the coming, victorious Christ

19:12—*His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself*

- c. Contrasted with the mark of the beast given to the wicked—who will be condemned

14:11—*And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name*

13:16-18—*And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, and he provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six.*

V. APPLICATION

WE MAY BE CALLED UPON TO TAKE A SACRIFICIAL STAND FOR CHRIST—ANTIPAS

SOMETIMES WE MUST BE CHRIST-IN-CULTURE—IN ORDER TO WITNESS—BUT . . .

SOMETIMES WE MUST BE CHRIST-AGAINST-CULTURE—TO AVOID COMPROMISE

BEWARE SUBTLE SOCIO-POLITICAL ARGUMENTS THAT LEAD TO COMPROMISE

BEWARE THE ANCIENT TEMPTATION/ALLURE OF CIVIL RELIGION