

2"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

13" I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and 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 the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

Pergamum

This 3rd city was 55 north of Smyrna, and 20 miles from the Aegean Sea. The name means “parchment” which was likely made here first – of animal skins. It is now modern day Bergama.

①

Pergamum can be traced back to the 5th century BC, but was founded as a kingdom in 282 BC. The Romans took it over in 133 BC, and Pergamum became the capital of the province of Asia for 250 years. When John wrote Revelation, it still held that distinction, but in modern times this city has very little influence over that region.

It was a wealthy city which had built temples, altars, statues and groves to her many idols: Zeus, Athena, Dionysos, & Asklepios. Asklepios was a reptile-like god while Dinoyosos was associated with serpents. Although the city seemed to be fascinated by idol worship, it also became the first Asian city to erect a temple to worship the Roman emperor, Augustus in AD 29, and to the goddess Roma. A 2nd temple was added during the reign of Trajan. Caesar worship was intense at Pergamos and Christians were under constant daily danger of severe consequences if they did not offer worship to Caesar.

This city's fame also grew from the fact that it was the birthplace of Hippocrates (the most famous ancient doctor of medicine), and it also had a renowned library that rivaled the one at Alexandria. When this library began, its works were on papyrus imported from Egypt, but when Egypt realized that their own library was being overtaken, they refused to ship any more papyrus to Pergamum. It was as a result of this problem that parchent, as an alternative to papyrus was developed at Pergamum and the 200,00 volume library grew until it was taken by Cleopatra to Alexandria where it was eventually destroyed by the Sarcens in AD 642.

I. The Speaker

v. 12

Jesus' name for Himself here refers back to Rev. 1:16 and is also connected to Rev. 19:15,21. The city leaders had been given authority from Rome to execute those who would not bow the knee to Caesar, yet Christ is the highest authority and His 2 edged sword depicted here has more than one meaning & significance.

Certainly it refers to His conquest over those in Rome who believe it is their authority to persecute and control people. It goes beyond that in Rev. 19, where it now carries the weight of conquering all of the world's powers, not just Rome's.

The fact that this 2-edged sword is described elsewhere (Heb. 4:12; Isa. 49:1-2; Eph. 6:17; and cf. Psalm 147:15) as connected to or as a simile of God's word means we must address this aspect of this. After all, in Rev. 1:16, the 2-edged sword is not literal – but must be symbolic of God's word in Christ's mouth, as these other references support. He needs no literal sword to conquer anyone. He created the worlds with a word – “He spoke & it came to be.” – and He'll need no literal sword to dispatch His enemies, because His word will be enough. Who could stand before that?

It is this powerful, conquering, overcoming, authoritative and cutting ability that Christ uses as His name to this church to convince them to repent of those sins He is about to expose. In fact, He elucidates it even more clearly in Rev. 2:16.

II. The Commendation

v. 13

Although the phrase, “where you dwell” is found a number of times in Revelation, and usually refers to dwelling in some aspect of moral significance, whether good or (usually) bad – speaking of people living on earth and whose interests are tied to this present world – cf. Rev. 6:10. Here, it seems more related simply to this city as the residence of those who live there – both Christians, and Satan. In all 6 of the other letters, Christ says, “I know your deeds”, but here, “I know where you dwell.” It is possible that this is empathetic. ②

Jesus goes on to say that this is where Satan's throne is, and He repeats it twice; once associated with where the church dwells and the 2nd time to describe where Antipas was martyred. As you can imagine, there has been much conjecture over what Jesus means by this phrase, since most commentators do not see any evidence that sin, persecution or opposition to the gospel was any worse in Pergamum than in any other Asian city, and it surely did not rival what was occurring in Rome itself.

The Throne of Satan

There are 7 main approaches to this phrase:

- i. It is the seat of worship to Asklepios, an image of a god holding a serpent. This image was a rival to Dianna at Ephesus and of Apollo at Delphi. The popularity of Asklepios at Pergamum was well know to most in that region and it became known as the center for that sort of cultish worship.

For Christ to connect this idol with Satan would have shocked the church. The priesthood of the cult was said to possess great medical secrets for healing and it held some similarities to Christianity, as Asklepios was also referred to as “saviour” by its' followers.

It is thought unlikely that Pergamum was the leading place in the promulgation of this cult, and the serpent was also symbolic of Zeus, who was also known as “saviour”.

- ii. It could be referring to the altar of Zeus Soter, set up to celebrate a victory over the Gauls 200 years earlier. It was built on an acropolis of the altar platform of Zeus with enormous and beautiful sculptures. Even this magnificent edifice, which could resemble a throne of Satan, does not explain the prominence of Pergamum over other places where Zeus was worshipped.
- iii. It could refer to the fact that Pergamum was the home of a special spirit of persecution. The martyrdom of Antipas mentioned gives evidence of a fierce display of Satanic power not as prominent in other places. Remember that the message to Smyrna also mentioned Satan’s synagogue in regard to persecution, however, again, there does not seem to be enough of the prominence of this aspect of persecution over emperor worship when compared to other places.
- iv. It could be a figurative reference to the power that works against the church – ie. I Thess. 2:18 – but again, this was true everywhere else too.
- v. It could be that this city was worse than the other 6 and Satan’s impact in Pergamum is seen by temples to at least 4 of the prominent Greek ‘gods’ – Zeus, Athena, Dionysos & Asklepios. Their likenesses even showed up on coins from there. There was no doubt an oppressive Satanic undercurrent in that city, and some believers were listening to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. But was this enough prominence to evoke this phrase from Jesus? Not likely.
- vi. One commentator, E.W. Bullinger, believes that this phrase relates to the time yet future when power & authority is given to the Beast (Rev. 12 & 13), and that the throne of this Beast (16:10) will be at Pergamum. The current martyrdoms at Pergamum are foreshadows of worse martyrdom to come. But this is a letter, not a prophecy yet, so that is unlikely and there is no reason to read future martyrdom into this phrase. ③
- vii. The most likely meaning is attached to the Emperor worship that went on in Pergamum. It was very prominent there and it was the leading city of Asia in this regard. There was a temple to Augustus & the goddess Roma, and a/o AD 29, a temple to honour Trajan was also built. There was a special priesthood for this religion and throughout the book of Revelation, some sort of emperor worship is occurring as those who are unsaved pay homage to the worldwide emperor – the Antichrist. Rome did possess the authority for capital punishment & it is possible that John’s personal circumstances made him see Rome as the most current & powerful Satanic agency – it demanded absolute allegiance to the state, which placed people by default into paganism, idolatry & worldliness.

Their Faithfulness

Despite their proximity to Satan’s Throne, the people of this church had “held fast My name” and did not deny the faith, even in the days when faithful Antipas was martyred. What Jesus means by this is that they were personally faithful to Him in spite of the significant adverse opinions which leaned heavily to severe persecution when one refused to submit to the worship of Caesar & deny Christ. This is not referring to

doctrinal purity here – that will come up in vv. 14-16 – but it is at least a commendation for seeing Jesus as Lord.

This faithfulness must have been evident from some past persecution that some had undergone and had made a good confession, and here the example of Antipas is presented. Here was one who had been faithful unto death & obviously had solid faith, and apparently, some had stood with him, risking their own lives.

Very little is known about Antipas. The name means “against all”, but tradition says he was martyred by being burned to death in a bronze bull during the reign of Dometian. He was likely the first among many martyrs at Pergamum, as execution of believers was just beginning to become a public policy. In any case, the repetition of “where Satan dwells” puts the cause for this policy of martyrdom squarely in Satan’s lap.

III. The Rebuke & Call to Repentance vv. 14-16

Balaam

“But I have few things against you.” They had faith, but there were some problems to be addressed at Pergamum. The church was tolerating the teaching of 2 false religious groups – the teaching of Balaam & the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The way the passage is worded, these were no traveling or itinerant teachers, but were part of the congregation.

The people as a whole were holding fast to faith in Christ, but some were instead holding fast to Balaam & the Nicolaitans. The fault at this church lay with their indifference to those within it who were worshipping falsely. They may not have been (as a whole) adhering to the false doctrine but were letting it go on. The derivatives of the names of these groups are: Balaamites = “swallowers of the people”; and Nicolaitans = “conquerors of the people”.

The main account of Balaam is found in Numbers 24-25. There are also mentions in Num. 31:16 (where Balak is also mentioned in the context made note of here), as well as in II Pet. 2:15 & Jude 11. His sin boils down to the fact that, as God’s prophet, he sold his gift of prophecy to a wicked king for profit. He was covetous and greedy and this was a sin to be avoided when his name is mentioned in the NT. As a result of Balaam’s sin in the OT, 24,000 people of Israel went into idol worship.

At Pergamum, greed was not the problem associated with “Balaam”, but rather it was a relaxing of their principles (the way Balaam had done) in order to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. These false teachers were putting a ‘stumbling block’ in the path of the faithful – a “*skandalon*” – a trap to catch them or cause them to be tripped up. ie. – the occasion over which a person could fall into sin – in this case, idolatrous feasts, not necessarily accompanied by sexual immorality. In any case, some of them were being lured to a teaching that made them drop their guard against those things that Christians ought not to be involved in. This type of teaching told them that it was OK – “don’t worry, it’s not sin”. Christ tells them, “Yes it is.” Notice Acts 15:1-20.

The Nicolaitans

There were also some at Pergamum who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. This had been a problem at Ephesus too (Rev. 2:6) where Christ said that He hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. As mentioned during the lesson on the letter to Ephesus, it is not entirely certain what the Nicolaitans taught but whatever it was – Gnosticism (likely) or antinomianism – it offered an attractive alternative for some of the Pergamum church members, and some were falling for its' lies.

Repent

As a result of the fact that Jesus Himself had now exposed these internal cults that this church was tolerating, they needed to immediately repent. This repentance would have to include exposing and rebuking those so misled and bringing them under church discipline if necessary. They could no longer tolerate this false teaching in their very midst.

If they failed to repent, Christ warns that He will come to them soon and “war against them with the sword of His mouth.” This does not necessarily mean Christ’s 2nd advent and final judgment, but could mean a soon to come temporal judgment, much like had occurred in Corinth as a result of that church’s unholy practices during the Lord’s Supper – cf. I Cor. 11:29-32.

In any case, it is clear that Jesus will not allow this practice to continue unabated. Unwillingness to repent is evidence that one is not a true believer, and reveals that one is not operating their life under the Lordship of Christ. The punishment threatened does not seem to be limited to those who were following the false teachers, but includes ⑤ the whole church who were tolerating what was going on.

Jesus’ reference to “the sword of My mouth” here again (2:12) suggests that He intends to violently deal with these transgressors by His word, the very thing which is being abused by the false teachers.

IV. The Command to Heed the Warnings

v. 17

Again, this same formula is used to introduce the blessing that will arise from heeding the instruction given. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”. This is said in each of the 7 letters. It is saying, “what will you do with what has been brought to your attention that requires repentance?”

The blessing promised to the ‘conquerors’ or ‘overcomers’ at Pergamum is 2-fold, and a bit difficult to understand. Surely they would have understood it, but some 1,900 years later, it is not so obvious to us. First of all, neither one seems to be associated with Christ’s return as the promises to the 1st two churches are. Ephesus – “eat from the tree of life in God’s paradise”; and Smyrna – “not to be hurt by the 2nd death”. In Pergamum, the promise centers on – “some of the hidden manna” and “a white stone with a new name written on it.”

The Hidden Manna

We are all doubtless aware of what manna was in the OT. It was a sort of coriander flavoured bread that God miraculously made to appear in the wilderness to feed His people when there was no food (Ex. 16:14ff). In Ex. 16:33, we are told that some of it was placed in side of a jar in the Ark of the Testimony to be a memorial of this provision by God. This hidden manna represents Jesus Christ, the bread of life – cf. John 6:48-51 – as he provides that spiritual sustenance for all who put their faith in Him. This hidden manna exemplifies the blessings and benefits of knowing Him (Eph. 1:3).

The Ark of the Covenant, as far as the biblical record tells us, was never finally captured by the marauding nations who came against Israel and tradition tells us that Jeremiah hid it before Jerusalem’s destruction and it won’t be discovered again until Israel is restored in the future. Rev. 11:19 tells the location of the heavenly ark which the earthly ark is a picture of – Heb. 8:5-9:24. This heavenly food, this manna, is placed in juxtaposition to the “food sacrificed to idols” that the church at Pergamum was partaking of. It was the earthly manna that the Israelites were living on (for 40 years) when they encountered the original OT Balaam.

Christ is promising that He can give them something the world can never compete with and to waste one’s time on worldly substitutes when Christ is right there was foolish & dangerous.

A White Stone

Although there are a few ideas tossed around as to what this white stone might represent – a diamond, a stone from the breastplate of the high priest (Ex. 28:36-37), the Urim (stone hidden under the breastplate of the high priest), a judicial stone like that used by ancient juries to signify their vote - the most likely meaning is a reference to the stone awarded to the victors of athletic games which gave them access to a special feast. This stone would be symbolic of granting access to the great future feast – the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. ⑥

The “new name written on it” is tougher to speculate about. Obviously, based on the fact that only the person receiving the name will know it, it makes it impossible to say what that new name is. It is thought by some that this new name, since it is engraved on the white stone noted above is related to entrance into the kingdom of glory. It will surely be a name which will accurately and perfectly reflect each believer’s special love by God. This combination of victor’s stone and a new name provide the promise of eternal security – our most treasured hope and possession.

Next lesson – Rev. 2: 18-29 The Church at Thyatira