

“To the Church in Pergamum”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 5

Texts: Revelation 2:12-17; Numbers 25:1-9; 31:16

Throughout the Book of Revelation, Satan is depicted as a defeated foe, who, in a final act of desperation, wages war on the people of God. In certain instances, we read of Satan empowering the Beast to persecute Christ’s church, using the full power of the state and the point of the sword. But in other instances, Satan takes a much more subtle approach. As the father of lies, Satan is not only the persecutor of the church, he is also the seducer of the church. In the Book of Revelation we not only read of the Beast who makes war upon the saints, we also read of the harlot, who seduces the peoples of the earth. Like the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamum faces intense persecution from the God-hating Roman empire. But the church in Pergamum also faces an enemy from within, a seductress who entices God’s people to commit spiritual adultery.

As we continue our series on the Book of Revelation, we come to Christ’s third letter to the churches of Asia Minor; our Lord’s letter to the church in Pergamum. Recall that each of these seven letters are part of a larger vision which began in Revelation 1:12 with John’s description of the resurrected Christ. When John is granted the privilege of seeing Jesus in his post-resurrection glory, he describes what he sees. But words obviously fail him. John describes the struggle between Jesus Christ and his ancient foe, the devil, using apocalyptic language in which the words that are used are symbols which point to the “story behind the story,” namely, Jesus Christ’s certain victory over Satan and all of those allied with him. All of these symbols are drawn from the Old Testament.

No longer depicted as a bruised reed, the Jesus of the Book of Revelation is the Almighty, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the one who was dead but who is now alive forever more. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is the great high priest who not only purchases us with his own blood but who also makes us to be a kingdom of priests. In this book, Jesus is God’s final prophet. He speaks to us about the course of this present evil age which is the great tribulation, that final period of human history, depicted throughout the New Testament as the “last days.” In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is described as God’s all-powerful king. He wins in the end.

Throughout this series of visions, John describes how Jesus is even now ordering the affairs of men and nations to bring all things to that end for which God has appointed them. In what is, perhaps, the greatest display of his kingly power, Jesus holds in his hands the keys of death and Hades. Therefore, Jesus has the power to do as he has promised. He will undo the curse of sin and death and one day he will make all things new. Although Revelation is a mysterious and often misunderstood book, it is one of the most practical books in the whole of the New Testament. There is much here for us to contemplate as we eagerly await the second coming of our Lord.

As we have mentioned previously, it is important to keep several things in mind about these seven letters as a group, before we look the individual letters in some detail.

Recall that in the opening chapter of this book, John sees Jesus walking among seven golden lampstands, which are symbolic not only of Christ’s presence with each of these churches, but the lampstands are also symbolic of the Holy Spirit’s blessing of these particular congregations to be a light to the world around them. In the Book of Revelation the number seven symbolizes completeness or perfection. Many

commentators understand the fact that there are *seven* letters to *seven* churches to mean that in these letters Jesus is speaking to his entire church throughout the course of this entire age, even though the historical circumstances are that Jesus is speaking to seven historic congregations in Western Asia Minor in the mid-nineties of the first century. When Jesus speaks to each of these churches, he is describing situations which Christians living during John's time were actually facing. But while Jesus is speaking to the Christians in these particular congregations, he is also speaking to us. "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*"

It is also clear from John's account that Jesus knows the exact circumstances facing each one of these congregations. Five of the seven churches are commended for being faithful to Christ, while three of the five are also rebuked for specific sins and areas of failure. Two of these congregations, Smyrna and Philadelphia, receive no rebuke whatever from Jesus. Instead, they receive an exhortation to persevere. Two more churches (Sardis and Laodicia), receive only a rebuke and are not commended in any sense at all. One of these churches thinks it has life but is actually dead (Sardis), while another thinks it is rich, but is actually poor (Laodicia).¹ Since Jesus is always present with his people, he knows what each of these churches faced. He knows what we face.

Before we turn to our text in Revelation 2:12-17, it might be useful to quickly survey some of the things that Jesus said to the churches in Ephesus and especially in Smyrna, since the situation in Pergamum is somewhat similar.

The first of these seven letters was addressed to the church in Ephesus. This particular congregation was commended by our Lord for faithfully persevering in true doctrine and for driving certain false apostles out of the congregation. The Ephesians are also commended for hating the teaching of the Nicolaitans, who were a heretical sect who sought to synthesize Christianity and paganism and who are singled again out by our Lord for rebuke in our text this morning. But while the Ephesians are given great praise by our Lord for their faithfulness and perseverance in sound doctrine, they are also given a very stern rebuke. According to Jesus, the Ephesians have lost their first love—which is not a reference to their love for Christ, but a reference to their love for each other. Unless this congregation repents and goes back to doing those things which they did at the beginning, Jesus will remove his lampstand from them, effectively removing his blessing and the effectiveness of the church's witness to the city. When Jesus exhorts this congregation to do those things they did at the beginning, he is referring to those acts of mercy and charity which characterize the apostolic church we see in the opening chapters of the Book of Acts. Works of charity and mercy go hand in hand with perseverance in sound doctrine.

As for the church in Smyrna, a different set of circumstances are in view than those in Ephesus. Yet, the circumstances facing the Smyrnans are quite similar to those facing the church in Pergamum. The Smyrnan congregation lived in a city with a sizable, but apparently, secularized Jewish population. In addition, the city was very devoted to emperor worship, among the most devout found throughout the entire Roman empire. Although the Jews of Smyrna made peace with emperor worship—proclaiming allegiance to both YHWH and Caesar—the Smyrnan Christians did not. Barred from the marketplace for refusing to pay homage to the emperor and slandered by the Jews, the Christians in Smyrna lived in abject poverty. Refusing to confess "Caesar is Lord" in order to buy and sell—which is to take the Mark of the Beast—the Smyrnan Christians paid dearly for their confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord." Many of Christians were imprisoned. Many more would die at the hands of the Roman Beast.

¹ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 68.

But Jesus makes a promise to his persecuted church. In Revelation 2:10-11, Jesus tells the Smyrnans, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life . . . He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” Although the warning of impending persecution does not sound like much of a promise, the fact of the matter is that the Smyrnans will face persecution for a very short time—ten days—and by persevering, they will receive the crown of life. To the victor goes the spoils.

In the famous millennial passage in Revelation 20:4, John sees “*the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.*” Therefore, even when it looks like Satan triumphs over the saints, he is actually being defeated. For those who suffer for ten days (a short period of time) will be raised to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years! This, then, is one of the great paradoxes in redemptive history—Satan loses the most ground when his wrath against God and his people is the greatest!

Therefore, with the similar circumstances of the Smyrnans in mind, we now turn to the letter to the Church in Pergamum.

Once again, some historical background here is necessary to understand some of the things which our Lord mentions in this letter. The city of Pergamum was sixty miles north of Smyrna and about fifteen miles inland. The city was widely known for its fine animal skin parchment—the English word parchment actually comes to us from the cities’ name—and housed a number of libraries and temples. One thousand feet above sea level, Pergamum was a noted religious center with temples dedicated to Zeus “the Savior,” Athena, and Dionysus. There was also a temple dedicated to Asclepius “the Savior” who was the god of “healing” and whose symbol, the serpent, is still used on medical emblems today. As in Smyrna, the Romans built a huge temple to the goddess of Rome in 129 B.C., followed by temples to emperors Trajan and Severus. The ruins of several of these temples are now housed in the world famous Pergamum museum in Berlin.

By John’s time in the late 90’s, Pergamum had even surpassed its southern neighbor (Smyrna) to become the *de facto* center of emperor worship. The city was rewarded by being given the seat of the local Roman government.² Pergamum was dominated by various forms of paganism, some offering salvation in the name of Zeus, while others offered salvation in the name of Asclepius.³ What is more, Pergamum was a city where Caesar was also worshiped as “a god” making this a very difficult place for a Christian to profess that “Jesus Christ is Lord” and that his name is only one name whereby people may be saved.

Indeed, ancient writings from the area indicate that Christians—the *christiani*—were mocked by the Romans and labeled as infidels to the empire, and therefore subject to expulsion, imprisonment, or even certain cases, capital punishment. The Jews in Pergamum regarded Christians as “Nazarenes,” a seditious sect who were to be shunned because they would not attend the pagan feasts or honor the Greek and Roman deities in the marketplace. It was the refusal to call Caesar “Lord” which prompted the

² Kistemaker, Revelation, 127.

³ See Beale, The Book of Revelation, 245 ff.

Romans to have Christians arrested. And, as in Smyrna, the Jews were only too happy to help the Romans identify them. Christians in Pergamum faced the full wrath of the Satanically empowered beast, who we read in Revelation 13:8 was given “*power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.*” But as we have already seen, Satan’s apparent victory over God’s saints is certainly a hollow one.

As is typical of each of the other letters, the letter to the church in Pergamum opens with both the familiar address to the congregation and a specific word from Jesus which recalls to mind a particular aspect of John’s vision of the Risen Christ in Revelation 1 which uniquely applies to this church: “*To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.*” The image of a sword dominates the entire letter. The sword is symbolic of Jesus Christ coming to this church in his kingly office for the purpose of bringing judgment upon his enemies. The sword symbolizes Christ’s judicial power—the power to judge all things according to the truth of God’s word—and it warns the apostates within the church of Christ’s impending judgment upon them.⁴

But the sword is also symbolic of something else. Roman governors were granted the “power of the sword” by the emperor in order to put to death those Christians who refused to acknowledge the divinity of Caesar. While the Satanically inspired beast—the Roman empire—wields the sword against Christians and wages war upon them, Jesus Christ uses the same symbol to remind his church of just who it is who wields the real sword of justice and power. The message is clear: All of those who persecute Christ’s people with the sword in this life will themselves face the judgment of Jesus Christ in the next. The ancient proverb is true, those who live by the sword will die by the sword. But this warning is also aimed at those individuals who seduce Christ’s people through false doctrine. They too will face his sword of judgment. Jesus is a jealous bridegroom who will do everything in his power to protect his bride.

This must be kept in mind when Jesus says to the church in Pergamum: “*I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*” As the Lord of his church, Jesus knows exactly what the Christians in Pergamum are facing. The city is dominated by paganism and emperor worship. In fact, the city’s most prominent landmark was a large hill upon which the temple of Zeus stood and which dominated the city’s skyline. This is where Satan lives. This is where he has placed his throne!⁵ But despite the deeply rooted paganism, the Christians in Pergamum have remained faithful to their Lord even though one of their own, a man named Antipas, was put to death in this very city—that city dominated by Satan himself.

Even though this persecuted church has faced the point of the Roman sword and yet remained faithful to her Lord, nevertheless Jesus does have a strong word of rebuke for the Pergamum church. This church has become far too tolerant of false teaching and compromise: “*Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*” These doctrinal errors are so grievous that Jesus threatens to “*come to them soon and fight against them with the sword of his mouth.*” For tolerating such heresy, Jesus commands the Pergamum church to repent, lest he come in judgment.

⁴ Beale, Revelation, 246-247.

⁵ Beale, Revelation, 246.

The issue is similar to what Christians faced in Smyrna, although there is a new wrinkle this time. Even though Christians in this church have faithfully resisted the powerful external pressure put upon them by the local Roman government to deny Christ—the Satanically inspired beast who has put some of their own number to death—a number of these same Christians are slowly but surely being seduced by false teachers in the congregation who are leading them away from Jesus Christ through deceptive means. These false teachers don't force believers to deny Christ at the point of a sword. Instead, they entice believers to deny Jesus Christ using more subtle means. And how do they do this? The answer is to be found by looking at the Old Testament example of very similar circumstances mentioned by John in this letter.

The group singled out for rebuke by our Lord Jesus hold to the teaching of Balaam. As you may know, the story of Balaam is told in Numbers 22-25. Through the means of his deceitful counsel, Balaam deceived Israel into worshiping idols and committing immorality bringing the nation under the wrath of God. We read of the consequences of Balaam's deception in Numbers 25:1-9 and Numbers 31:16 our Old Testament lesson: *“While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them. The LORD said to Moses, ‘Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD's fierce anger may turn away from Israel.’ So Moses said to Israel's judges, ‘Each of you must put to death those of your men who have joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor.’ Then an Israelite man brought to his family a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear through both of them—through the Israelite and into the woman's body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000.”*

In the Numbers account, Israel never denied YHWH in so many words. Rather, many in Israel began worshiping Baal without ever formally denying YHWH. But away you look at it, this is a denial of YHWH, because YHWH alone is God and he will not share his glory with any other. As a result of Israel's spiritual adultery, God not only brought judgment upon a couple caught *flagrante delicto* but some 24,000 Israelites died from a plague God sent upon the people. In the summary comment in Numbers 31:16 we read; *“They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD's people.”*

Therefore, when we read in the New Testament that Jesus Christ threatens the church in Pergamum with the sword for tolerating the Nicolaitans, what provokes our Lord's righteous ire must be false doctrine similar to that of Balaam. Here we have a situation in which Christians would absolutely refuse to deny Christ at the point of a Roman sword. But at the same time, they thought nothing whatsoever wrong with participating in certain pagan practices with their non-Christian friends, family and business associates outside the church. Just as in the days of Balaam when citizens of Israel worshiped YHWH *and* Baal at Peor, so here in Pergamum, Christians were being led away from Christ by those in their midst who were teaching that it is perfectly acceptable to worship Jesus and at the same time to participate in certain pagan ceremonies and sexual practices which dominated the civic and cultural life of Pergamum.

That the Nicolaitans were not denying Christ directly, but doing so implicitly can be seen when Jesus warns this church about eating meat sacrificed to idols, as well as reminding them that Christians must avoid all sexual immortality, especially when these things are directly connected to paganism. These are

very prominent themes throughout the New Testament even though they seem foreign to us so many years removed. Recall that Paul speaks about this same matter in his first letter to the Corinthians. It is addressed at the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, when the leaders of the church affirmed with one voice the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, while at the same time insisting that Gentiles avoid eating meat used in pagan sacrifices and sexual immorality.

What is in view here is not vegetarianism or celibacy. God is not against meat or sex. What is in view is the fact that Christians cannot eat meat which was left over from pagan sacrifices and rituals, and then sold in the marketplace at a discounted price. For a Christian to eat such meat is, in effect, to sanction or condone the pagan practice of animal sacrifice and bloody fertility rites. Paul calls this sharing the table with demons in 1 Corinthians 10. While Christians are to avoid all sexual relations outside of marriage, this is especially a serious matter in places like Pergamum where so many people were involved in temple prostitution or participated in drunken feasts and orgies and directly tied to the civic, cultural and commercial life of the city. And it is easy to see how such a thing could take place.

In order to conduct business, Christians were invited to pagan feasts where ungodly things took place. And since it was possible to improve one's social standing or business prospects by marrying someone whose family was well-connected, Christians were tempted to marry outside the church so as to avoid the stigma and persecution associated with being a follower of Jesus Christ. As the Israelites indulged themselves with Moabite women, so too, the Christians in Pergamum saw nothing wrong with being sexually involved with pagans or joining with them in pagan religious practices. And for this, Jesus will come to them with the sword of judgment.

The principle for the church in Pergamum as well as the application for us today is very simple. Christians cannot worship Christ *and* at the same time participate in pagan or non-Christian religious practices. We have but one master, Jesus Christ. And we serve him only. To participate in paganism in any form is to deny Jesus Christ and invoke his wrath. Indeed, what Satan has not been able to accomplish through the sheer power of the Beast, he has able to do through the seduction of the church. Christians in this congregation saw nothing whatsoever wrong with worshiping Christ on the Lord's day and then participating in the ceremonies of pagan religions later in the week. Furthermore, the biblical sexual ethic was being obliterated by a pagan sexuality in which professing Christians were marrying outside the church, or participating in sexual activity directly tied to paganism.

This is a very serious matter and Jesus warns the Pergamums of their peril while commanding them to repent. We read in verse 17, the now familiar exhortation, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,*" along with the promise of covenantal blessing, "*to him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*" To those who overcome by remaining faithful to Jesus Christ, Jesus promises them to eat from the hidden manna—a reference, perhaps, to the manna which is preserved in the Most Holy place in the tabernacle, or more likely, to the fact that in John 6 Jesus himself promises to nourish his people with the living bread from heaven.⁶ This living bread from heaven is none other than Christ's gospel word of promise, a promise which is confirmed through the sacraments.

Indeed, those who overcome will be given a white stone with a new name. The white stone not only symbolizes purity, a source of great comfort to those who had fallen victim to sexual immorality, but the

⁶ Poythress, [The Returning King](#), 87.

name which appears upon it is known only to the one who receives it, even as Jesus Christ, the rider of the White Horse of judgment in Revelation 19 has a name known only to himself. The white stone therefore binds the recipient to the Savior, who one day will come with his sword to execute judgment upon those nations who have persecuted Christ's people, as well as judging all those who seek to lead Christ's people away from him through the seduction of spiritual adultery. Those with the white stone need never fear the sword of justice, for they are Christ's and he knows those who are his! Amen.