

PERGAMOS: THE CHURCH AT HELL'S GATES

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REV 2:12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ 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.

REV 2:14 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. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

REV 2:17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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.

We often speak about hell too lightly. For example, here in East Kentucky we have a community named "Hell for Certain" and another named "Helechawa", which means, according to an article I read, that some man was asked how to get there, and was answered, "Well, there are two ways to get there, 'but it's hell each way.' The early church was aware of hell in another way than just a funny name or a curse word, for they, especially this Church in Pergamos, were living very close to hell. The influence of evil was so great that they were living at the very gates of hell. But they knew the promise of Jesus that the "gates of hell" would not prevail against the church.

Now, through John the Revelator, Jesus speaks to His Church in Pergamos, a church that was very certainly near the 'gates of hell'. Before we proceed, let us look at this city. *The Expositor's Commentary* says: "The inland city of Pergamum lay about sixty-five miles north of Smyrna along the fertile valley of the Caicus River. Pergamum held the official honor of being the provincial capital of Roman Asia, though this honor was in fact also claimed by Ephesus and Smyrna. Among its notable features were its beauty and wealth, its library of nearly two hundred thousand volumes (second only to the library of Alexandria); its famous sculpture; its temples to Dionysus, Athena, Asclepius, and Demeter and the three temples to the emperor cult; its great altar to Soter Zeus; and its many palaces. The two main religions seem to have been the worship of Dionysus, the god of the royal kings, symbolized by the bull, and Asclepius, the savior god of healing, represented by the snake. (Ramsay, *Seven Churches*, p. 284). This latter feature made Pergamum the " Lourdes of the ancient world" (Charles, *Commentary on Revelation*, 1:60). Tradition also records that in Pergamum, King Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.) planned to build a library to rival the one in Alexandria. Ptolemy Epiphanes of Egypt (205-182 B.C.) took action to stop this venture by cutting off the export of papyrus

sections. It was this embargo that forced Eumenes to develop vellum or parchment (*pergamene*, "from Pergamum"), a writing material made from animal skins.

I. THE CHURCH AT THE GATES OF HELL WAS A CHURCH UNDER PERSECUTION.

Pergamos was the capital city of the Province of Asia, and as such, was given what it considered the privilege of exalting Caesar worship. Now, in the dire circumstances of being "under the sword" Jesus refers to Himself as having "a sharp, double-edged sword." *The Expositors Commentary* says: "It is interesting that Pergamum was a city to which Rome had given the rare power of capital punishment (*ius gladii*), which was symbolized by the sword. The Christians in Pergamum were thus reminded that though they lived under the rule of an almost unlimited *imperium*, they were citizens of another kingdom--that of him who needs no other sword than that of his mouth (Caird, p. 38)." Not only were they under the sword of hell, they had martyrs to prove it. One of those was Antipas, as verse 13 tells us. Again, the *Expositor's Commentary* says, "The proximity of the name "Satan" before and after Antipas in v. 13 makes it virtually certain that his death was instigated by the enmity of pagans in Pergamum. He may have been the first or most notable of martyrs. Christ pays this hero of the faith a noble tribute: "faithful witness"--words that John applies to Christ himself in 1:5. Satan tries to undermine loyalty to Christ by persecution; Christ strengthens that loyalty by commending those who are true to him and by exposing those who are deceitful."

Whatever we say about America, however negative we may become, we still must realize that we have freedoms in this dear land that almost no other country upon earth has achieved. We can speak freely. We can tell others about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have freedom of speech and of assembly. May God help us never to lose these freedoms. I am hopeful, and believe that we will keep these freedoms. But we must be vigilant, for the *Bible* says, "Your adversary the devil, goeth about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." On every side the devil has his yelping dogs snarling and biting at the heels of our faith. Recently a humanist group in New York or California, one or the other, rented buses with the message, "There is no God. Enjoy yourself." Some time ago the media picked up on one "former Christian" who is encouraging young people to curse the Holy Spirit. Now, Bill Maher has made a movie about confronting Jesus and making fun of Him. The "gates of hell" are not far away. If we are not vigilant, if we do not defend our faith, if we give in to the relentless power of satan and his manipulation of 'air headed' media personalities, if we do not earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, God help us, we may become the next Antipas, the sword may fall upon us. But, let us remember, we can be vigilant, we must be vigilant; and even if the sword falls, Christ speaks with a "Double-edged sword." And since He is the Omega, He has the last word, not the devil.

II. THE CHURCH AT THE GATES OF HELL WAS ALSO A DIVIDED CHURCH.

At Pergamos the Church had all kinds of religious persecutors. In the *Expositor's Commentary* we find these words: **13** "The speaker's knowledge is searching: he knows that they live in a hostile and difficult place "where Satan has his throne." This certainly refers to the fact that Pergamum was a center for worship of the pagan gods, especially

the emperor cult. The first temple in the empire was established in honor of Augustus in A.D. 29 at Pergamum because it was the administrative capital of Asia. In succeeding years the city boasted of being the official *neokoros* ("temple sweeper") of the "temple where Caesar was worshiped" (Barclay, *Seven Churches*, p. 45). Others see the reference to the altar of savior Zeus or the center of worship of Asclepius, the snake god of healing. Pergamum was an idolatrous center; and to declare oneself in that place a Christian who worships the one true God and Savior, Jesus Christ, would certainly provoke hostility."

The Church at Pergamos was at the Gates of Hell and had a million enemies. However, a million enemies without are not nearly so devastating to the fellowship of a church and to its witness in the world as ten unfaithful members in a church who create confusion and trouble. The Proverb writer listed as one of the things God hated—"he that soweth discord among the brethren." Again the *Expositor's Commentary* says, 14-15 "The speaker's verdict reveals that the church in Pergamum was divided. Some had followed Antipas and did not deny Christ's name or his faith (v. 13). Others held to the teaching and practice of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans that Christ hates (2:6). Since the name "Balaam" can mean to "conquer the people" (Heb. *ba'al'am*), which means the same as "Nicolaitans," and since they are mentioned together in this letter, both groups may be closely related (see Notes, v. 15). In fact, the error in the church at Thyatira through the teaching of the woman Jezebel may also be similar to this one. In that letter and this one, the more deadly effects of the error are described as "eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality." (2:14, 20).

The OT names Balaam and Jezebel serve to alert the church community to the insidious nature of the teaching that was not until now recognized as overtly evil. Since Satan's chief method is deception, his devices are not known until they are clearly pointed out. Christ exposes error here by identifying the false teaching in Pergamum with clear-cut evil such as that of Balaam and Jezebel. Balak, king of Moab, Balak, could not succeed in getting the venial prophet Balaam to curse Israel directly. But Balaam devised a plan whereby the daughters of the Moabites would seduce the Israelite men and lead them to sacrifice to their god Baal-peor and worship him (Num 25:1 ff.; 31:16; cf. 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11). So God's judgment fell on Israel because of fornication and idolatry. What Balak was not able to accomplish directly, he got through Balaam's deception. While the Ephesians recognized the Nicolaitan error (v. 6), apparently Pergamum and Thyatira were deceived by it; it was an unconscious subversion. What Satan could not accomplish at Smyrna or Pergamum through intimidation, suffering, and death from outside the church, he achieved from within."

In the first Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, you will recall, James, the head of the church issued an edict that the Gentiles be accepted and that they eat no food sacrificed to idols, and abstain from fornication. Obviously some of the Gentiles were doing just that. In some of the churches in pagan cultures, the converts reverted to their old practices. This must have happened here. Shameful! Yes indeed. That people who call themselves Christians could think that Christ would wink at their immorality; that they could say as an excuse "well I'm just a sinner anyway"; that they could say 'his grace will accept me anyway, and I can do what I wish'; that they could even think such things smacks at all the righteousness and holiness of Jesus who suffered death for our sins. What Satan could not achieve from outside the church he was able to achieve within. These sinful members had divided the church, and had besmirched the Name of Christ. The church members

had opened the Gates of Hell, and some demons had come in. In verse 16 “The speaker's command includes both a call to the whole congregation to repent and a special threat to the heretical members if they do not repent. Since those who did not indulge in these things tolerated their practice by some of the church's members, they, along with the guilty, needed to repent. If those at Pergamum will not heed the word of Christ's warning, that word from his mouth will become a "sword" to fight against the disloyal.” *Expositor's Commentary*.

My dear brothers and sisters, our greatest danger is not from atheists, humanists, abortionists, drug dealers, and any other sinners. As Pogo said, “We have met the enemy, and they are us.” The greatest enemy of the church is that sinful member within. God says repent! And he says to a too tolerant membership, Repent! Why? Because the church tolerant of sin is a church God has already judged.

Church members must never go by the standards of the world as they did in Roman society when Christ spoke to Pergamos. Barclay tells us that even great men like Demosthenes and Cicero accepted as normal the pleasures of sexual immorality. Demosthenes said, “We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately, and having a faithful guardian of our household affairs.” Cicero stated that such activity as sexual promiscuity was simple part of the “customs and concessions of our ancestors.” In that society the wife seems to have been little more than a ‘baby factory’ and a household slave.

III. THE CHURCH AT THE GATES OF HELL WAS ALSO A CHURCH UNDER JUDGMENT.

Pergamos with all its religion, with its great library, with its worship of bulls and snakes, with all its imperial power, is no more: God's judgment fell upon it. The same judgment of God is also pronounced by the Living Christ upon the church that denies the faith.

Look at their sin in verses 14 and 15: Members of the fellowship of the church of Pergamos were actually teaching others to “eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication.” Christ said, “Which thing I hate!” God hates sexual immorality, whether that immorality be inside the marriage, whether it be between male and female, or the same sex, whether it be in pornography or in reality. God hates sexual immorality! Mark it down, underline it, and be sure to write it with red ink, “God hates sexual immorality!” To be sure, God who hates the sin, loves the sinner. But the sinner needs to repent.

If God hates sexual immorality, He must hate it worse when it is practiced by one who calls oneself a Christian. Jesus is saying, “Look, I hate what you are doing, practicing idolatry and sexual immorality! I hate it!”

But then He is also saying, “Yet, I love the sinner, and I am willing to forgive you of your sin. In fact I paid the price for your sin with my own blood. Therefore, I am giving you, once more, another chance.”

I find God's love here much greater than any other reality. “For God so loved the world.....” Remember the words, “God is not slack concerning His promises as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” As someone once said, “Ain't God good?”

But the Goodness of God, as Scripture reminds, is a call us to repentance. This is a lesson for the sinful world; but this is also a lesson for a sinful church, or a sinful church member. Repent! Repent! Repent! I love you! I love you! I love you! I am giving you another chance to escape inevitable destruction.”

When Jesus says, Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly...” He is saying it will be immediate and it will be severe!

But judgment doesn't have to be negative, it can also be positive. Jesus says in verse 17, “Listen to what I have to say, and Overcome.” Don't fall for false doctrine; and don't be so tolerant to those who teach false doctrine. “Earnestly contend for the faith delivered to the saints, and this will be my judgment unto you: 1. I will give (him that overcometh) to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”

Barclay tells us the ‘white stone’ symbolizes juries that in ancient days voted by casting ‘black’ or ‘white’ stones. The white stone is for acquittal, and the black stone for condemnation. The judgment of Christ is acquittal if we will repent! We musn't get that ‘black’ stone. Also Barclay tells us that the ‘white’ stones were used as counters and calculations, meaning that the one who repented would be counted among the people of God. Also the white stone was a symbol of a happy day. Pliny talks of a day “marked by the whitest of white stones.” True happiness consists of being Right with God. When we are right with God, all our days will be better, and we can say with the Psalmist, “This is the day that the Lord hath made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.” Also, according to Barclay, ‘white’ stones were used as admission to entertainment. The faithful will be entertained in the presence of Jesus Christ Himself, and He will be the Light of our world now, and the Light of that world which is to come. Finally, the ‘white stone’ had that Name, the Name of Jesus on it. Like those who wore amulets, the Christian wore the ‘white stone’ with the Name of Jesus in it, the stone which the builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone of the church, and will become that of the New World coming down from God out of Heaven.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary says: “to Christians tempted to compromise their loyalty to Christ to gain the favor of the pagan gods, Christ generously offers himself and the power of his name so that those who have faith in him may overcome.”

And the Hidden Manna? Well that is a reference to the golden pot of manna that was hidden in the “holy place” of the Temple along with Aaron's budding rod, and the stone tables of the Ten Commandments. Legend had it that Jeremiah hid the Manna, and that when the Messiah set up His Kingdom the pot of manna would be brought back. The manna in the Old Testament is called “Angel's Food.” Barclay says, “The point is that those who on this earth refused to eat the meat that had been offered to idols would in the world to come eat the bread of God. They might have to give up earthly pleasures, but heavenly joys would be theirs.” *The Expositor's Commentary* says, The “hidden manna” is reminiscent of the manna hidden in the ark of the covenant by Moses ([Exod 16:33-34](#); [Heb 9:4](#)). Since Moses' pot of manna was designed to remind the Israelites of God's grace and faithfulness in the wilderness ([Ps 78:24](#)), there may be a similar thought here. In apocalyptic Jewish teaching, however, the messianic era will see the restoration of the hidden wilderness manna: “And it shall come to pass at that self-same time (in the days when the Messiah comes) that the treasury of manna shall again descend from on high,

and they will eat of it in those years" ([2 Baruch 29:8](#); [Sib Oracles 7:149](#)). To those at Pergamum who refused the banquets of the pagan gods, Christ will give the manna of his great banquet of eternal life in the kingdom ([John 6:47-58](#)).

The Judgment of God for the Pergamos Christians who have Overcome is that that they would Eat Hidden Manna, and be given, by Christ Himself, a white stone with a New Name written that no man would know but him who received it."

I crave that "hidden manna", and I earnestly desire to receive that 'white' stone with that wondrous 'new name' upon it. Don't you?