**The Church at Pergamum**

**Revelation 2:12-17**

**The City of Pergamos**

The city was located 65 miles north of Smyrna and 15 miles east of the Aegean Sea. Its name meant “citadel” and the highest point of the city was an elevation of 1000 feet which dominated the entire country side. Pergamum, also, is the word from which we derive “parchment” (the city was the first to make parchment writing material, Thomas 177).

It was a religious center with temples for Greek gods of Zeus, Athena, Dionysios, and Asclepius. In front of the Temple of Athena (daughter of Zeus, goddess of wisdom, war, and crafts) was a 40-foot high statue of Zeus (great god of the sky; ruler, protector, and father of all humans). Asclepius was the god of healing and its symbol was a snake, which is commonly associated today with the profession of medicine (caduceus). After the Romans received control of Pergamos from the Pergamanian king, Attalus III, in 133 BC, they built their own religious temple and dedicated it to Augustus and introduced worship of Caesar (29 BC). Emperor worship became centralized in Pergamos and exceeded the cities of Ephesus and Smyrna. Pergamos was the 1st Roman administrative center in the province of Asia. The proconsul who lived there had the power of the sword to determine whether a person lived or died.

Christians were ridiculed in Pergamum. They were called “christians” (“little anointed ones”) by the Romans and “Nazarenes” by the Jews. They were charged with infidelity to Rome, accused of sedition, persecuted, and killed. They lost their jobs if they refused to attend festivals honoring the pagan gods. In place of attending the pagan temples, they said their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit. In contrast to the library of 200,000 volumes in Pergamos, they emphasized the Scriptures. In lieu of seeking the healing of Asclepius, they taught that Jesus was their great physician. Because of their stand for Christ, the lives of Christians were unbearable in Pergamos. They were treated as outcasts.

**I. Christ Commends the Perseverance of Believers**

**2:12-13: *And to the angel to the church in Pergamos write, these things says he who has the sharp two-edged sword: I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to my name, and did not deny my faith even in the days in which Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.***

**A. The Introduction of Christ:** Christ is introduced as*“He who has the sharp two-edged sword”***.** Except for the name of the church, the introduction of each letter to the 7 churches is essentially the same. Jesus’ description of himself is taken from one aspect of the vision given to John in the 1st chapter. Although the identical phrase “two-edged sword” appearsin 1:16, the Greek in 2:12 has three definite articles added for emphasis and says, “The one who has the sword, the doubled-edged one, the sharp one” (Thomas 180). John is emphasizing that it was not the Roman proconsul who decided on matters of life and death, it was Jesus with the sharp, two-edged sword proceeding from his mouth (Thomas 181). The two-edged sword is the word of God (Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17). One day, Jesus will fight with this sword against his enemies, 2:16; 19:15, 17; II Thes 1:8; 2:8.

**B. The knowledge of Christ:** *I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.* Jesus is fully aware of the situation at Pergamos and addresses the residents of the city who were called to serve the true God. “Satan’s throne” means where “Satan dwells”. “Throne” occurs 42 times in Revelation; 40 times it refers to God’s throne; 2 times it refers to Satan’s throne (2:13; 16:10).

**C. There are multiple possible interpretations given to the phrase “Satan’s throne”. Five are stated below (Thomas 184):**

1. Pergamos was a center of pagan religion with all of its temples and idols. No doubt Pergamos was a religious center devoted to pagan gods. But, in this respect, it was no different than the city of Athens, which was a city filled with idols and its people were very religious (Acts 17:16, 22). This doesn’t seem to be the best explanation for the “throne of Satan” if it could be located in other cities.

2. To a traveler coming from the east, the acropolis had the appearance of a throne, i.e., Satan’s throne. Even though the symbolism of its external throne-like appearance was striking to the eye, the internal evil control and sinister work of Satan in the lives of the people requires a better explanation. For this reason, it is not the best explanation.

3. The great altar of Zeus had the appearance of a throne. Zeus’ altar, in fact, was huge and did have the physical resemblance of a throne. It was placed on the acropolis 1000 feet high, prominently above everything else in the city and it was imposing. Sacrifices were offered 24/7. However, Zeus could be worshipped anywhere in Greece, Macedonia, and Asia Minor, and on a positive note, Zeus was thought of as the progenitor and protector of the human race. This explanation is not a good fit for the sinister and evil work of Satan against this church.

4. Asclepius was identified with the serpent. This explanation has some merit because the symbol of Asclepius is a serpent and in Scripture, Satan is represented by the serpent (Gen 3:1; Rev 12:9; 20:2). Personified in the god Asclepius, Satan proves to be the great deceiver as the healer of the sick and the savior of the people.

5. Pergamos was the Asian center of emperor worship. This probably is the best explanation. While the 4th calls attention to Satan’s deception, the 5th stresses Satan’s power not only in deception but also in persecution and death. Christians who refused to confess Caesar as Lord and God were persecuted, faced confiscation of their property, exile, and even death. A temple to the “divine” Augustus and the goddess Roma already had stood in the city for greater than 100 years. So, if we consider the history of emperor worship in Pergamum, that Antipas was brutally killed here and John was exiled to Patmos from nearby Ephesus because of his testimony for Christ, then this 5th explanation seems to fit the overall context, best.

**D.** **Christ commends perseverance:** *And you hold fast to my name.*

In spite of the fact that the church was surrounded by so many pagan deities, most believers in Pergamos held fast to their faith in Christ and were commended because of it. We need to remember that most of the converts in Pergamos had come from paganism, and undoubtedly the religious and social pressure to abandon Christ and to return to their pagan worship was severe.

1.They did not deny the faith:*And did not deny my faith even in the days in which Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.*

2. The tense of the verb, “deny”, points to a definite situation in the recent past when members of the church were faced with the challenge of denying their faith in Christ (Thomas 186). Whether there had been an outbreak of persecution because of alleged disloyalty to Rome, we do not know. In any case, one martyrdom had occurred: “*Antipas my witness, my faithful one”*, had been killed because of his faithfulness to the Lord.

3. The martyrdom of Antipas: We have no further information about Antipas’ death except what is written in this verse. However, tradition states that his prayers were powerful and inhibited pagan worship. He was arrested and when he refused to offer incense to the emperor, he was burned to death inside a bronze bull during the reign of Domitian (Thomas 186). If tradition is true that he was killed as a result of a judicial sentence, then his death would be one of the earliest for refusing to engage in emperor worship. The Greek word for “witness” is *martys,* which later came tomean a martyr. In Rev 17:6, the same word is translated “the martyrs (witnesses) of Jesus”. By being faithful to the point of death and suffering martyrdom, Antipas bore his most effective witness for the Lord.

4. “Where Satan dwells” identifies Pergamum as the place where Antipas was killed. This clause traces the death of Antipas and his persecution to Satan and his minions who enforced emperor worship as the ultimate cause of his death (Thomas 188).

**II. Christ is Intolerant of False Teaching**

2:14-15 *But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus, you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.*

**A.****Christ has something against the church:** *But I have a few things against you;* instead of praising the church for its steadfastness, Jesus rebukes the church because of weaknesses they displayed. Although he identifies several items (“a few things”) against them, Jesus only enumerates one, i.e., their lack of resistance to false teaching and its effects on the believers’ conduct in the church.

**B. The church tolerated false teachers:** The church tolerated teachers who spread their sinful lifestyles and failed to expel them from the congregation. Their influence was spreading like a cancer in a healthy body. Remember that when a similar situation occurred at Ephesus, the Ephesians stopped it and disciplined the teachers and expelled them from the church. The church at Pergamos did not do this.

**C. The false teachers taught the doctrine of Balaam:** This was a very serious offense before the Lord.*Because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.* No information is presented to identify the false teachers. “*You have there those*” can refer to people who had been accepted into the church as “bona fide” members or it can refer to members who were adversely influenced by people outside the church.

Jesus calls to mind the story of Balaam and Balak and the nation of Israel and says, Balaam *taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.* We learn by inference from the O.T. that after Balaam’s triple failure to curse the Israelites, he told Balak to lure them to commit adultery with the Midianite women, to eat meat sacrificed to idols, and to worship pagan gods (Nu 31:16; ch 25). In Pergamos, people who followed the teaching of Balaam set a similar trap for the followers of Christ by asking them to participate in the practices of those who practiced emperor worship.

**D. How did the false teachers trap the believers:** Apparently, it was similar to the steps that Balaam advised Balak to follow.First, they suggested it was acceptable for God’s people (i.e., Christians) to eat meat they knew had been sacrificed to idols (Nu 25:2). The believers knew they should not question the origin of meat for sale at the market place; however, they should have known that they could not participate in feasts dedicated to an idol (I Cor 10:19-22). Next, the followers of Balaam led the Christians to engage in the worship of their gods (through food and alcohol); and then, join in sexual immorality (Nu 25:1). However, they also knew that the Law of God barred them from entering into extramarital relationships (Ex 20:14). So, how could the Christians become convinced they could do these things?

Apparently stressing Christian liberty, the followers of Balaam taught that physical activities pertaining to sex and foods offered to idols were acceptable (cf. Gal 5:3, 16-21). By doing this, many Christians were deceived and being overtaken by their fleshly desires, succumbed to the eating of food sacrificed to idols, wine, and to sexual immorality.

Perhaps, at first, the followers of Balaam urged the Christians to sacrifice animals in the worship of Caesar (at the altar of Zeus). They might have said that the sacrifice would entail only the burning of an insignificant part of the animal and would leave the rest to be eaten and enjoyed by the Christians. But, Christians should have known that they cannot worship both God and Caesar (II Cor 6:14-7:1). However, some did and committed the ultimate act of disobedience, i.e., the worship of a false god.

**E. It appears the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was the same or very similar to the doctrine of Balaam:** *Thus, you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.* We know from the letter to the church at Ephesus (2:6) that the teachings and the practices of the Nicolaitans were an abomination to Jesus. Even though there is little information concerning these people, we assume that their lifestyle was characterized by the sins of sexual immorality, eating of food offered to idols, and perverting apostolic teachings. Here, Jesus seems to confirm that the members of the church who followed the teaching of Balaam and practiced the sins of idolatry and immorality were similar to the Nicolaitans. Question: Was the doctrine of those following Balaam and the Nicolaitans actually the same? Probably the answer is yes because of the way that Jesus said it (i.e., he seems to conclude this: “Thus, you **also** have those who follow the doctrine of the Nicolaitans”); and, because the intentions of the followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans were the same. Balaam’s teaching defeated the Israelites by deception and the Nicolaitans entered the church with deceptive teachings and accomplished the same thing. It is best to understand that there were two different groups within the church, i.e., followers of Balaam and followers of the Nicolaitans, but that there teaching was essentially the same or very similar.

**III. Christ threatens Judgment against the Church**

2:16 *Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*

**A. Christ commands the church to repent:** The verb “repent” occurs 12 times in the book of Revelation. Eight of the occurrences are found in the addresses to the 4 churches of Ephesus, Pergamos, Sardis, and Laodicea. The other 4 occurrences refer to unbelievers who refused to repent. The Christians of Pergamos had to repent of their failure to expel the Nicolaitans and their followers from among them. They had to see the error of their way, because if Jesus hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, they should also. So, he called the Christians to turn their laxity into watchfulness, to enforce spiritual discipline, and to expel the Nicolaitans and their followers.

**B. Christ threatens to judge unrepentance:** If the believers in the church refuse to repent, Jesus will come quickly (The Greek is an emphatic present tense verb, meaning “I am coming”). Christ’s coming refers to his coming in imminent judgment against them if they do not repent. As the Midianites and Balaam experienced God’s judgment in their lifetime, so the followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans would soon encounter Jesus as judge in their lifetimes (e.g., during the battle that Israel fought against the Midianites at God’s command, the Israelites killed Balaam, Nu 31:1-8; Josh 13:22). Because it is written to all the churches (2:17), it also has near-far prophetic implications that need to be considered as with the other letters.

**C.** **Christ will judge sin by his word:** Notice that the Lord calls the church to repent but “declares war” on the Nicolaitans. He will fight them with the double-edged sword that proceeds from his mouth (v.12; Heb 4:12; Eph 5:17; Matt 4:4). With this sword, he will slay the wicked, including the Nicolaitans and the followers of Balaam. The Lord will forsake all those who forsake him. In contrast, those in the church who repent of their sins will experience the love, grace, and mercy of the Lord. The Lord will honor his promises and cancel his threat against the repentant sinner. However, when there is no repentance, he will fulfill his promise of judgment.

**IV. The Promise of Christ to the Overcomers**

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 to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.*

**A. Christ promises hidden manna and a white stone:** After the exhortation to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches the overcomer receives a promise of hidden manna and a white stone. What are these 2 gifts?

**B. The identity of the hidden manna:** *I will give some of the hidden manna to eat;* for 40 years, manna was Israel’s food in the wilderness until the people crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan. God instructed Moses to place a jar of the manna in the ark of the covenant, and thus it was hidden out of sight (Ex 16:32-34; Heb 9:4). According to the writer of II Maccabees 2:4-7, at the destruction of Solomon’s temple (586 BC), Jeremiah hid the tabernacle (with the hidden jar of manna) along with the altar of incense in a cave at Mount Nebo and sealed its entrance.

How should we understand this hidden manna? The Jews looked forward to eating this hidden manna when the Messiah came. Christians, on the other hand, acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah and therefore, ever since the 1st coming of Jesus, his followers have “eaten” the hidden manna and enjoyed its blessing in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus called himself the “bread of life” and even contrasted himself with the manna that the Israelites ate in the wilderness (John 6:30-35; 41-42; 48-52). He called his followers to “eat of this bread” (John 6:53-58). It is hidden from the view of the unbeliever (II Cor 4:4) but is available to all those who put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 11:25; Col 2:3; 3:3).

**C. The identity of the white stone:** The meaning of the white stone is difficult to determine, but several explanations have been offered (Thomas 201):

1. Rabbinic speculation said that precious stones fell from heaven along with the manna from God in the OT

2. White stones were cast in courts of law by jurors to signify exoneration of the accused and black stones were cast to condemn them. On judgment day, a white stone would be given to the Christian signifying his acquittal through the cross-work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. A white stone could be used as an amulet or good luck charm (but doesn’t this appear to be superstition?)

4. Could the white stone be symbolic of the victor (i.e., individual Christian) himself, seen as white because he has overcome the final strife (sin)? However, the individual is not the stone but he receives a stone.

5. Buildings in Pergamos in John’s day were made out of dark brown stone. Inscriptions were cut into blocks of white marble and placed among the brown bricks. Benefactors of the city had their names engraved in these white marble stones and placed in the walls of the buildings. This could allude to Christ’s promise to the church of Philadelphia, Rev 3:12.

6. Could the white stones be an allusion to the practice of counting with stones in the province of Asia? If so, then it might mean if a man is faithful, he would be counted among the people of God.

7. Could the stone simply symbolize a happy day, a day of victory?

8. The breastplate of the high priest had 12 stones and each one had the name of a tribe written on it (Ex 28:21). Similarly, couldn’t a white stone with the name of the individual believer on it always be in God’s presence.

9. The stone may be a translucent precious stone like a diamond on which the name of Christ is written. The name of Christ is written on the foreheads of the saints (Rev 3:12; 14:1; 22:4).

10. When an athlete won in the games, as part of his prize he was given a white stone which was a pass to the winners’ celebration afterwards. This may picture the moment when the overcomer receives his ticket for the eternal victory celebration in heaven.

11. A white object made of steel, wood, or stone called a *tessera,*  which granted its possessor certain privileges. This might be the best understanding of the stone (Thomas 201). It would refer to the free food and free admission to events occasionally offered to citizens of the Roman Empire in exchange for “tickets” which were in the shape of small stones. Such a white stone with one’s name on it was the basis of admission to these events. Hidden manna, the other part of the reward could refer to the heavenly Messianic feast (Marriage Supper of the Lamb). Thus, the white stone is a personalized *tessera* which would symbolize the required token for admission to the feast (eternal life).

**D. The stone has a special name on it:** *And on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.*

On the stone will be a new name written, known only to him who receives it. Some think that the new name is that of God or Christ (cf. 3:12; 19:12). But these names are not secret and the fact that this name is *secret* is strongly emphasized here. The word “*new*” (*kainos*, Gk), does not mean new in time as opposed to old but it refers to something new and different in nature or character (Thomas 201). A good understanding of this name comes from understanding the function of a name in antiquity.

With us today, a name is no more than a distinguishing mark, a label; something to identify us by. But in antiquity, a name was widely held to sum up a person’s life, what the man stood for. It represented who he was, his character; it stood for the whole man. Here, the new name would best represent a new character. The fact that no one knows the name would be a crippling disadvantage today. In the modern world, what is the use of a name that nobody knows? But for people of antiquity, the hidden name was precious. It meant that God had given the “overcomer” a new character which no one knew except himself. It was not public property. It was a secret between the man and God. It might best represent the unblemished character of Christ (Phil 3:12-14).

Although very important, Thomas argues that it is more than just the character of Christ. He says that the new name is “the recipients own name, a new one, reflecting his status as belonging to Christ” (Thomas 202). Since all believers will have the character of Christ for eternity, the new name must not only reflect this new character of Christ, but it must be individualized to include the personal attributes and qualities demonstrated by that individual in this life. “The new name denotes the victor’s new state in the time of consummation. The practical identity of the name and personality in biblical thought leads to … the bestowal of a new name upon entrance to the new state” (Thomas 202). See Gen 32:28; Is 62:2; 65:15. Cf. Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Saul to Paul, Simon to Peter, etc.