

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

The Message to the Church in Pergamum:

Revelation 2:12-17

The Compromising Church

*The Commission to Write to the Church in Pergamum:*¹⁰⁰

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write"(2:12a):

The City of Pergamum:

Geographically: Pergamum was located in the western part of Asia Minor, north of Smyrna. It was about 15-20 miles from the Aegean Sea. It was not a port city. It had no harbor. Pergamum was not on any of the major trade routes. From Ephesus the road went about 35 miles to Smyrna; from Smyrna the road followed the coast for about 40 miles and then another 15 miles up the valley of the Caicus to Pergamum. Much of Pergamum was built on a large conical hill towering some one thousand feet above the plain. Sir William Ramsey commented, "Beyond all other sites in Asia Minor it gives the traveler the impression of a royal city." The ruins exist today in the Turkish city of Bergama.

Historically: The history can be traced back to the 5th century B.C., but its superiority and headship in Asia began in 282 B.C. In that year Philetaerus threw off allegiance to King Lysimachus and founded the kingdom of Pergamum. For the next 149 years, Pergamum was the capital of a kingdom varying in size from only part of the Caicus Valley to the size summed up in the expression "all the land on this side of Tarsus." During the early years the Seleucid dynasty supported Philetaerus in opposition to Lysimachus, but later a rivalry began between the Seleucid and Pergamian kings. The kings of Pergamum held the upper hand until 222 B.C. when Antiochus the Great restored the power to his dynasty. In 190 B.C. the Romans aided in the expulsion of Antiochus and again enlarged its boundaries to its largest extent. In 133 B.C. Attalus III bequeathed the whole kingdom to the Romans who formed it into the province of Asia. Pergamum would be the capital of Asia for two and one-half centuries.

Culturally: "Pergamum was a center of learning, medicine, and religious books, boasting a library of 200,000 volumes. It became the home of many princes, priests, and scholars who wished to study there."¹⁰¹ "Pergamum's huge library was second only to that of Alexandria. According to legend, parchment (vellum) was invented by the Pergamenes to provide writing material for their library. Seeking to build a library rivaling the one in Alexandria, a third century B.C. Pergamene king attempted to lure the librarian of the Alexandrian library to his city. Unfortunately, the Egyptian ruler got wind of the plan, refused to allow the librarian to leave, and in retaliation prohibited the further export of papyrus to Pergamum. Out of necessity, the Pergamenes developed parchment, made out of treated animal skins, for use as writing material. The Pergamenes were responsible for its widespread use in the ancient world. In fact, the word *parchment* may derive from a form of the word *Pergamum*."¹⁰² So impressive was Pergamum's library that Mark Antony later sent it to his lover, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. The library was transported to Alexandria by Cleopatra and remained there until it was destroyed by the Saracens in A.D. 642. Pergamum was also the birth place of Galen, next to Hippocrates the most illustrious physician of the ancient world. It boasted a large medical school associated with the temple of Asklepius.

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

Economically: Pergamum was not a center of business. It was not a port city nor was it near a major trade route. It could not compete with Ephesus or Smyrna in the world of trade. It was known more as a center of learning and religion than for economics.

Religiously: Pergamum was a wealthy city with many temples devoted to idol worship. It was full of statues, altars, and sacred groves. There were temples to Zeus, Athena, Dionysius, and Asklepius, who were the chief local deities. Zeus and Athena represented Greek spirit and influence. On the other hand, Dionysius was the god of the royal family and had a mystic name, "Bull." Asklepius was more closely associated with the serpents. A medical school was attached to the pagan cult of Asklepius, and the well-known symbol of the medical profession, a serpent twined around a staff, was its insignia. People came from all over the world to be healed by the god Asklepius, who was worshiped in the form of a living serpent fed in the temple. The serpent was intimately connected with one of the ways in which cures were effected. Sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple. In the temple there were non-poisonous snakes. If the sufferer was touched by the harmless snakes during the night (which was equivalent in their thinking to being touched by god himself) he would be healed. Pergamum was the first city to have a temple consecrated to Augustus (29 B.C.) and the goddess of Roma. A second temple was erected in the time of Trajan. Caesar worship was the most intense at Pergamum. In some cities the Christian was only in danger on the day of the year when a pinch of incense had to be burned. In Pergamum a Christian was in danger 365 days of the year.

The Church in Pergamum:

"The book of Acts does not record the founding of the church at Pergamum. According to Acts 16:7-8, Paul passed through Mysia (the region in which Pergamum was located) on his second missionary journey, but there is no record that the apostle either preached the gospel or founded a church there at that time. Most likely, the church at Pergamum was founded during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, when the gospel went out from there to be preached throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:10)." ¹⁰³ The church likely faced severe animosity and persecution from those who practiced emperor worship there in Pergamum.

The Picture of Christ to the Church in Pergamum:

from The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this (2:12b):

Christ is described as the One who has the sharp two-edged sword. This once again refers back to the vision of Christ in chapter 1. There Christ is described as having this sharp two-edged sword coming out of His mouth.

Remember, "The Old Testament source of the words is Isaiah 11:4, 'He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth' (cf. Also Isa. 49:2). Other New Testament passages are also relevant because they either liken the Word of God to a sword (Eph. 6:17, Heb. 4:12) or else predict that the returning Christ will destroy the man of lawlessness, 'with the breath of His mouth' (2 Thess. 2:8)." ¹⁰⁴

Remember, the Greek word *rhomphaia* was a large blade of Thracian origin. The description as coming out of the mouth is not surprising because this sword was short and shaped like a tongue. The blade being double-edged emphasizes greater sharpness.

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

Remember, "The resultant focus of this part of the description is upon the judicial authority of Christ. It combines the force of a warrior defeating his enemies in battle and the pronouncement of his sentence of judgment upon them."¹⁰⁵

The sharp two-edged sword refers to the Word of God and it depicts the Word's potency and power in exposing and judging the innermost thoughts of the human heart. It pictures Christ as judge and executioner. John will again use this image in his description of Christ's second coming in Revelation 19:5, "*And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite 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.*" "This is not a positive, promising introduction of Christ because the Pergamum church faced imminent judgment. Disaster loomed on the horizon for this worldly church; it was but a short step from compromising with the world to forsaking God altogether and facing His wrath."

The Commendation to the Church in Pergamum:

'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. (2:13)

"To Ephesus Christ wrote, 'I know your deeds' (2:2), and to Smyrna, 'I know your affliction and your poverty' (2:9). 'I know where you live' is Christ's focus in Pergamum."¹⁰⁷ "Despite the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves, the believers at Pergamum courageously maintained their faith in Jesus Christ. He commended them for continuing to hold fast His name, even though they lived where Satan's throne is, where Satan dwells. Many suggestions have been offered as to the identification of Satan's throne:

"Some identify it with the magnificent altar of Zeus that dominated Pergamum's acropolis. This was not simply an altar but an impressive structure which could easily merit the designation Satan's throne.

"Others connect Satan's throne with the worship of the god Asklepius that was prevalent in Pergamum. Asklepius was the god of healing, and people came from all over the ancient world to Pergamum, seeking to be healed at his shrine. Asklepius was depicted as a snake.

"Others point out that Pergamum was the leading center of emperor worship in the province of Asia. And the cult of emperor worship certainly posed the gravest threat to the Christians in Pergamum. It was for their refusal to worship the emperor, not the pagan gods, that Christians faced execution. Satan's throne could easily be understood as a reference to the might of Rome .

For any or all of those reasons, Pergamum could justifiably be called the city where Satan's throne is. The believers at Pergamum continued to hold fast the name of Christ, and did not deny the faith. They did not deviate from fidelity to Christ or to the central truths of the Christian faith."¹⁰⁸ The Church at Pergamum maintained its faithfulness even in the days of Antipas, whom Christ described as *My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you*. Antipas was probably one of the leaders of the Pergamum church. "Tradition tells us that Antipas had been summoned before the proconsul to sprinkle a few grains of incense on the fire and say 'Kurios Kaiser' (Caesar is Lord). Refusing, he experienced the ultimate punishment; death by being slowly roasted to death in a

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

brazen bull." ¹⁰⁹ "Witness translates the Greek word, *martus*, a word that eventually became transliterated into English as the word *martyr*, because so many witnesses for Christ paid with their lives. Here was a man who paid the ultimate price for his refusal to compromise. Because of faithfulness, the risen Lord commended Antipas with a title used elsewhere to refer to Himself (Rev. 1:5; 3:14). Antipas's faithfulness and courage were a rebuke to those at Pergamum who were tempted to compromise with the world." ¹¹⁰

The Condemnation to the Church in Pergamum:

"The church at Pergamum remained loyal to Christ and Christian truth. It faithfully persevered at the very headquarters, as it were, of satanic opposition even in the face of martyrdom. Yet all was not well at Pergamum. After commending the believers there, Christ informed them, *I have a few things against you*. His concern was that they had there, some who hold to false teaching. Specifically, Christ was concerned with two heresies being tolerated at Pergamum, one associated with an Old Testament character, the other with a New Testament person." (2:14-15) ¹¹¹

The teaching of Balaam: "First, some were following the teaching of Balaam. The story of Balaam, a notorious Old Testament prophet for hire, is found in Numbers 22-25. Fearful of the Israelites because of what they had done to the Amorites, Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse them. After trying unsuccessfully three times to curse Israel, Balaam came up with another plan. He plotted to use Moabite women to lure the Israelites into the behavior of the godless world around them, that is, sexual immorality and idolatry (Num. 25; 31:16). Balaam's plan succeeded, though not to the extent that he had hoped. God intervened and severely chastened Israel, executing twenty-four thousand (Num. 25:9), including many of the leaders (Num. 25:4-5). That drastic action halted the Israelites' slide into immorality and idolatry. Like the Israelites who were seduced by Balaam's false teaching some in the church at Pergamum were lured to mix with the pagan system." ¹¹²

"Christ mentioned three practices within the doctrine of Balaam that corrupted these believers.

"Balaam tried to entice them through mixed marriages, corrupting and destroying families.

"He attempted to entice them 'to eat things sacrificed unto idols,' thus bringing into contact with idolatry.

"He enticed them with the sexual sin of fornication, corrupting their moral purity." ¹¹³ This false teaching led some in the church into practicing immorality and idolatry, while those who were not enticed into such practices simply looked the other way and tolerated these sinful practices.

The teaching of the Nicolaitans: "A second heresy tolerated at Pergamum involved a New Testament figure. There were some there who in the same way held the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The phrase *in the same way* indicates that the teaching of the Nicolaitans led to the same wicked behavior as that of the followers of Balaam. The Nicolaitans as discussed earlier derived their name from Nicolas, one of the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food in Acts 6. Whether he became an apostate (as some of the early church fathers believed) or the Nicolaitans, his followers, perverted his teachings is not known. Abusing the Biblical teaching on Christian liberty, the Nicolaitans taught that Christians could participate in pagan orgies. They seduced the church with immorality and idolatry." The Nicolaitans propagated that Christians were free to live a licentious lifestyle. They freely partook in pagan festivities and indulged themselves in all sorts of sexual immorality. "The majority of the believers at Pergamum did not participate in the errors of either

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

heretical group. They remained steadfastly loyal to Christ and the Christian faith. But by tolerating the groups and refusing to exercise church discipline, they shared in their guilt, which brought the Lord's judgment."

The Counsel given to the Church in Pergamum: (2:16):

The prescription of correction given to the church in Pergamum is similar to that given to the church in Ephesus. Christ commanded that the church in Pergamum *Repent or else!* This of course is the proper remedy for any sinful behavior. "Repent is from *metanoeo*, a word used in Scripture to describe a change of mind that results in a change of behavior."¹¹⁶ "True repentance involves three things: contrition of heart, confession of sin, and a change in conduct."¹¹⁷ *Metanoeo* is in the aorist imperative which stresses the urgency of the command. This command is singular and refers to the church as a whole. The entire church was found guilty because they tolerated the heretical practices of a few rather than following through with church discipline as outline in Matthew 18. The church in Pergamum as a whole was given this urgent command to repent or else. If they did not follow the counsel of the Lord then they would face the battle sword of Christ's judgment. The heretics would face this sword for practicing their heresy and iniquity, while the church would face it for tolerating such iniquity in their midst. We must remember the exhortation of James, *You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* (James 4:4) "He would not and will not tolerate compromise within the church by those who try to defile it."¹¹⁸

The Challenge to the Overcomers in Pergamum (2:17):

Remember that the overcomer is a reference to all believers (1 John 5:4-5). Christ gives a three-fold promise to the faithful in Pergamum:

First, He promises to give them *some of the hidden manna*. This was honey flavored bread which God fed the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness (Ex. 16:14ff.). The hidden manna likely represents Jesus Christ as the Bread of Life (John 6:48-51). It symbolizes all the benefits and blessings of knowing Christ, and that He provides spiritual sustenance for believers throughout eternity.

Second, They will be given a *white stone*. There are many suggestions on what this white stone may symbolize. Some see it as a reference to the urim and Thummim on the breastplate of the high priest. Others identify it as a diamond symbolizing God's precious gift of eternal life. Some see it as representing the believer washed white as snow. "The best understanding of this white stone is in light of the Roman custom of awarding white stones to the victor in athletic contests. A White stone, inscribed with the athlete's name, served as his ticket to a special awards banquet. In this view, Christ promises the overcomers entrance to the eternal victory celebration in heaven."¹¹⁹

Third, There will be *a new name written on the stone*. This will be a name which no one knows except the one who receives it. The new name is a symbol of the personal and intimate relationship believers will experience with the Lord in heaven. "It will serve as each believer's admission pass into eternal glory. It will uniquely reflect God's special love for and adoption of every true child of His."¹²⁰