

A Tale of Seven Churches: Pergamum Revelation 2:12-17

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Pergamum didn't have the beauty of Smyrna nor the commerce of Ephesus however it was still a great city in its own right, a city of culture and government.

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Located about 37 miles north of Smyrna and 9 miles from the Aegean Sea, Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia Minor.

Sitting on top a 1000-foot-high conical hill, it commanded the surrounded area with its presence. The Roman Historian Pliny called it "*The most famous city in Asia.*"

Its greatest accomplishment was its huge library. Considered to be the second largest library in the world outside of Alexandria, it contained over 200,000 parchment scrolls.

This library leads to the second thing Pergamum was known for. About 300 years before Christ, a ruler of Pergamum, seeking to expand the library, tried to get Ar-i-stoph-a-nes of Byzantium who was the librarian at Alexandria, to come to work for him.

However, Ptolemy, who was the ruler of Egypt, got a little cranky when he discovered that he was about to lose this outstanding scholar.

So, he threw the librarian in chains, and then imposed an embargo on the shipment of papyrus to Pergamum.

Papyrus was the primary medium for writing in that day. Well, since necessity is the mother of invention, and if Pergamum was going to continue to have a great library, they would need something different with which to make their scrolls.

And so, the great minds of Pergamum got together and developed a technique to smooth and polish tanned animal skins known as the Pergamum material or in the Latin – parchment which replaced papyrus completely.

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It was to the church in this historic city that Jesus spoke in Revelation 2:12, *“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”*

Perhaps you’ve noticed the different titles that Jesus uses for the different churches. To the church in Ephesus He described Himself as the one who walks among the churches.

To the church in Smyrna, a city that had been destroyed and rebuilt, He describes Himself as the one who died and is alive.

And here in Pergamum, He describes Himself as the One who has a sharp two-edged sword. So what? Good question.

To understand Jesus’ description, you have to understand that since Pergamum was the capital of Asia, it was also the administrative home of the Roman Governor.

Now, Roman governors were divided into two categories: Those who had the *“Right of the Sword”* and those who didn’t. Those who had the *“Right of the Sword”* literally had the power of life and death. A person could be executed on the spot, if the governor so spoke.

This pro-consul or governor, who had his office in Pergamum, had the *“Right of the Sword”* and could use it at any moment against the church.

Jesus is reminding those believers that as the One who “*has the sharp, double-edged sword,*” the last word is still with Him. Rome may be powerful, but Christ is more powerful.

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And so, Jesus continues with His commendation for this church. Revelation 2:13, “*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, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*”

There are three things we need to notice. First is the phrase: “*I know where you live—where Satan has his throne.*” The city of Pergamum had three primary religious philosophies when this letter was written.

Further up the hill from the city stood a forty-foot altar used to present sacrifices to Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. This altar looked like a throne carved into the side of the mountain.

At the base of the altar was a carving depicting the Battle of the Giants, which in mythology was when the Greek Gods defeated the giants of Mother Earth.

When Jesus address the church in Pergamum, the religion of Zeus was in its twilight, so that probably wasn't what Jesus was referring to as the great throne of Satan.

Other scholars have suggested that perhaps He was making reference to the worship of As-cle-pi-os, the god of healing. His temples were the nearest thing they had to hospitals in the ancient world.

People from all over the Roman Empire flocked to Pergamum for relief of their afflictions. Because of this As-cle-pi-os was called “Asclepius the Savior.”

Christians would have viewed this as blasphemous and might have thought that this was the throne of Satan about which Jesus was talking.

The emblem of As-cle-pi-os was the serpent, which can still be seen on some medical symbols such as the Army Medical Corp. And so, some have said the serpent represented Satan, but it's still a stretch.

The simplest explanation is what I had mentioned earlier. As the seat of government in Asia, it was here that Caesar worship would have been at its strongest.

Remember, the Romans didn't care what god or gods you worshipped as long as you were willing to worship Caesar.

It was here that believers were required to take the title that belonged to Jesus and ascribe it to Caesar by declaring "Caesar is Lord," and for Christians there could be nothing more Satanic than that.

This also fits with Revelation 2:13, "*Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*"

And so, they were commended for their loyalty and faithfulness even in the face of death.

We don't know who Antipas was, but he was killed because he refused to deny the name of Jesus. He would have understood what Woodrow Wilson meant when he said, "*Loyalty means nothing unless it has at its heart the absolute principle of self-sacrifice.*"

Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends claimed to be loyal. Do you remember what he said in Mark 14:31b, "*Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.*"

And yet it wasn't even twelve hours later that we read Mark 14:66-72, *"While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. "You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said. But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, "This fellow is one of them." Again he denied it. After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about." Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept."*

Someone once said that Jesus isn't looking for people who will die for Him nearly as much as He is in getting people to live for him.

I'm sure Jesus was impressed that Antipas was willing to die for Him, but listen to those first words in Revelation 2:13, *"I know where you live."*

"I know that you live in the city." They hadn't cloistered themselves away somewhere safe, they were in the marketplace in the city, just like Jesus expects us to live in the world today.

This is where we belong, ready to stand up and declare our faith in Jesus and to stay true to who we are. As we live in the world, we are not only to remember who we are but to remember whose we are.

Don't deny Christ in your words, but even more importantly, don't deny Christ in your actions. In this country, you probably won't lose your life for your faith, But you could lose a friend or several of you could lose your job.

The question is: *“What would you be willing to lose before you denied your faith in Christ?”*

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I’m sure that those who heard these words were quite proud of themselves. They weren’t like the Ephesians who had lost their first love, and they weren’t like other Christians who fell to the Emperor’s bidding and offered the pinch of incense and uttered the words *“Caesar is Lord.”*

No, they had remained true. But Jesus wasn’t finished with them. Revelation 2:14-15, *“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”*

What did Jesus have against the church in Pergamum? Sin? Well, yes and no.

It’s easy to focus on the words in Revelation 2:14, where the teachings of Balaam taught them to worship idols by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin.

When we read that, we get self-righteous and proclaim that we’d never worship idols or commit sexual sin. But wait, there’s no evidence to suggest that sin was a major issue in the church.

It wasn’t that the majority of the church was committing sin, it was that they were not condemning sin. A little nod, a little wink and everything was okay.

As an aside, scholars tell us that the historical period this church represents is often referred to as the compromising church, representing a period in history from about 313AD until approximately 600AD.

During this period the church had moved out of the era where it was being persecuted into an era as an accepted religion. After Emperor Constantine's conversion in 313AD, it became socially and politically expedient to be identified as a Christian.

So, no longer was the church comprised of those who had experienced a life changing relationship with Christ, now everyone wanted to be a Christian. All of a sudden you have a multitude of pagans coming into the church without the benefit of a conversion experience.

Whether the church was overwhelmed by the sheer number of new "Christians" or if they just chose not to deal with the sinful practices these people brought with them is not clear.

But what is clear is that the acceptance of Christianity almost did what persecution failed to do. It almost destroyed the church.

The warning to the church today is clear. The numerical benefits, which come as a result of lowering our standards as a church, are dramatically outweighed by the resulting damage.

You cannot add cold water to a hot water bath and expect it to remain hot. Nor can you fill your tub with hot water and expect it to remain hot forever. You need to keep adding hot water if you want it to remain at a constant temperature.

The church of Jesus Christ needs to hold to sound Biblical principles. When we start to waver on the essentials, then we're in serious trouble. And that's what this church was doing.

It was accepting spiritual sin by tolerating those who worshipped idols. It was accepting moral failing by tolerating those who committed sexual sin.

The church in Pergamum doesn't represent an apostate church, but it does represent a church that's on the downward spiral to apostasy.

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So, they're warned in Revelation 2:16, *"Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."*

Jesus is saying, change your ways or I will fight to protect my church. Notice He doesn't say that He'll fight the church, He says He will fight those who are trying to destroy the church.

When He refers to the *"Sword of my mouth,"* He's referring to the Scriptures. Hebrews 4:12, *"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."*

And Ephesians 6:17, *"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."*

The sword of Christ is the word of Christ. If we look down through church history, we see time and again that when churches get to this point, where they teeter on the brink of apostasy, that God calls up someone to preach Biblical Admonition and Repentance to the church.

It appears from history, in most cases the human institution called the church, not to be confused with the Divine body of Christ, is all too willing to go down a road that leads to destruction.

Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, George Whitfield, Orange Scott and others were called of God to fight against compromising churches using the Word of God.

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Conclusion

And here's The Promise, Revelation 2:17, *"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it."*

This is to everyone who's willing to hear. The promise is as real for us today as it was to the church in Pergamum 2000 years ago.

Jesus begins by saying *"to the one who is victorious."* He's telling us to remain faithful, persevere, finish the race, don't quit. Remember it's not how well you start the race that counts, it's how well you finish.

And what happens if we're victorious? First of all, we're told that we'll eat of the manna that has been hidden away in heaven.

Does that mean that we'll be literally eating manna. I don't think so, I believe it means that we'll be feeding on the things of heaven.

If you don't like the earthly form of feeding upon Jesus today, which is: trusting Him, giving your heart to Him, obeying Him, thinking about Him, walking with Him and talking to Him, what makes you think that you'll enjoy heaven?

It confuses me that some people, who call themselves Christians, would rather spend their time with non-Christians, doing things contrary to Christian teaching, reading things at odds with Christianity, watching stuff they know that Christ would never approve of and then tell me they can't wait to get to heaven.

Don't they know that the very things they profess to enjoying so much here will be absent there. The things they don't want anything to do with here will be the rule there.

Another thing, those who'll be victorious will receive a New Name engraved on a white stone. Now, don't get all wrapped up in what the white stone means.

There have been several different thoughts. Some say that in the ancient world colored stones were used for working out calculations and so this means that you've been counted faithful. That's a bit of a stretch.

Another theory says that in ancient law courts black and white stones were used for rendering a verdict.

If the jury held up a black stone then the defendant was guilty, a white stone and they were innocent. So, the white stone would signify that we have been acquitted because of Christ.

Others talk about estates using distinctive stones to identify those who belonged to the household, so they could receive the benefits of the estate.

Another interpretation is that a gladiator who fought valiantly and bravely could receive his freedom indicated by a stone presented to him with his name on it. Thus, implying that if we're faithful and fight the good fight then we will gain our freedom in Christ.

Whatever! The important thing isn't the stone, it's the new name that we're given. Remember Simon became Peter, Saul became Paul, James and John became the Sons of Thunder. Joseph became Barnabas.

Do you ever wonder what your new name will be? The transformation begins here, the process of change has to start on earth.

Then there's the implication that everyone who's not victorious won't eat of the things of heaven and won't receive a new name.

That's a sobering thought! So, how do we become victorious? By walking daily with Jesus and confessing our sins and requesting to be forgiven of those sins on a daily basis.