

The Church in Pergamum Revelation 2:12-17

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Every city likes to have a unique and catchy nickname, usually something positive, attractive, and welcoming.

Here in Texas Fort Worth is known as “Cowtown USA,” Dallas is “Big D,” San Antonio is known as “Alamo City.” Unfortunately, Mineral Wells is known as “Miserable Wells.”

But what does this have to do with the seven Churches in Revelation? Well, Jesus gave Pergamum a nickname and it wasn’t too flattering.

He called it, the city “*Where Satan has his throne.*” Now, wouldn’t that look great in a travel brochure.

Again, let’s see where Pergamum was located.

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On the map, we see that Pergamum was located 65 miles north of Smyrna.

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It was the ancient capital of Asia Minor, filled with beautiful palaces and pagan temples.

It even had a university with a huge library of over 200,000 books. It also had a massive altar to Zeus. (On left side of picture)

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Pergamum was also known for its temple in honor of Asclepius, the pagan god of healing whose emblem was a serpent entwined on a pole.

This is the same symbol you see in reference to medical personnel and ambulances.

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So, what was going on in Pergamum? Since every citizen was expected to offer incense and declare “Caesar is Lord,” no Christian could do that in good conscience.

Thus, the stage was set for all-out spiritual conflict. In verse 13a we read, *“I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name.”*

When Jesus says that *“Satan has his throne”* there, He means Satan has found a place where he can exercise his evil influence.

Pergamum was covered with evil. Even today, Satan still has his thrones in various countries and cities.

There are even places where Satan has been in control for generations.

Missionaries know about this. They speak of cities clothed in spiritual darkness which fiercely and bitterly oppose the gospel message.

Today we’re more apt to find Satan hiding in places of cultural influence, in universities, in politics, in areas of economics, and even in religious centers where prayer is offered many times a day but where Christ is nowhere to be found.

Satan has many friends in politics, on Wall Street, in Social Media, etc. It’s to the credit of the church that despite widespread evil, the early Christians remained strong and steadfast in Christ.

It wasn't easy to be a Christian in Pergamum. In fact, it's still not easy to be a Christian in our world today; in universities, on Social Media, Europe, the Middle East, and even in our own backyard.

If there's not outright opposition, there's subtle and unrelenting pressure to keep quiet about our faith. People don't want us to speak openly about Jesus.

Yet, in this great battle, the believers of Pergamum were standing strong in Christ!

Jesus praised the people saying, at the end of verse 13, *"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."*

We don't know anything else about Antipas, but what matters most is the fact that Jesus knew his name and knew that he didn't give in to the devil.

Regardless that we don't know who he was, Antipas was remembered in heaven. All the martyrs, known and unknown by humanity, are known by Christ, and are experiencing their reward.

When we see or learn about these martyrs, we marvel and admire their courage, strength, and faith, but sometimes that's all we do, we admire from a distance.

When we see someone taking action, we agree with them, but most of the time we just sit and watch. We honor them, we thank God for them, but also we thank God it wasn't us.

We don't pick up their sword or banner, we just sit idly by watching and waiting for someone else to pick up the flag of Christ and go into battle.

So, what was their shortcoming?

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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.”*

Here’s the crux of the issue, and this may surprise you, their weakness was that they didn’t practice church discipline.

Listen to what Jesus said, *“you also have those who hold to the teaching of...”* He’s saying, *“You worship someone other than me.”*

What I hear is toleration of a wrong doctrine. It seems like they didn’t do anything to stop this, or maybe they tried and in exasperation they just gave in.

They refused to kick out the false teachers; those who held to the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

I explained who the Nicolaitans were in my message on the letter to the church in Ephesus.

They were a strange sect in the early church that taught that *“freedom in Christ”* meant you had the freedom to sin with impunity. In other words, there were no consequences for your sin.

It sounds like there were some in the church who were preaching and teaching false doctrines.

Now, I’m speculating and going from some commentaries, but it seems they were being a little too open minded as to what was acceptable in order to keep the church together and that never works!

Writing in the early 1900's, Dr. G. Campbell Morgan wrote that the church at Pergamum, had *“become guilty of Broad Churchism, attempting to find room for all sorts and conditions of men and faiths.”*

Broad Churchism. That sounds like what the modern-day church is dealing with today. Evidently at The First Church of Pergamum, they believed something like this:

“We preach the word of Christ. We believe in the Apostles Creed, the doctrines of the faith. But if you don’t agree, we won’t kick you out, we will let you teach what you believe. If you frequent the temple prostitutes, know that we view that as sin, but if that helps you to grow closer to your god, that’s okay. If you don’t like the preaching, we’ll give you an opportunity to preach your doctrine on a special Sunday, devoted to learning more about your practices.”

Isn’t that what many people want from the church? It would be called the First Church of Whatever. Ultimately, it’s a form of universalism. Any god will work.

In the end, the church became a deadly mixture of truth and error, purity and impurity, good and evil; and sooner or later — sin no longer seemed very sinful. Even today, churches are sliding down that slippery slope.

We need to guard against perverting the word of God. Now let me clarify something here. Here at Grace Fellowship, we want each person to grow in Christ, to become the very person Christ calls you to be. Not the person the world calls you to be.

In churches where false doctrine is taking hold, the people don’t see it happening. It doesn’t happen overnight.

The people keep attending, giving, and supporting the church. In the meantime, the church grows further and further from Christ.

One writer said, *“No church remains in the Pergamum stage forever. You can’t hold fast to sound doctrine while harboring those who promote immorality. In the end the church must go one way or the other.”*

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Now, Jesus gives His command to the church.

Revelation 2:16, *“Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”*

Christ takes personal offense when His church condones immorality within its walls. He threatens to pay a personal visit to Pergamum and fight against the evil teachers.

This verse does raise an interesting question. Who exactly is supposed to do the repenting? Certainly false teachers need to repent.

In the name of “open-mindedness and toleration” and even “building common ground,” churches have subtly compromised the Gospel.

Pastors must repent.

Ushers must repent.

Deacons must repent.

Trustees must repent

Teachers must repent.

The congregation must repent.

The church must decide who it is called to be. Will we be true to the gospel call of Jesus?

Will we do the hard work which is necessary for us to be the church He wants us to be, or will we compromise and try to be an average, run of the mill, good ol’ boy church?

We can easily imagine the church at Pergamum saying, *“We desire to be known as a church where everyone is welcome and everyone opinion is honored.”* That sounds good, but it’s not Biblical.

Jesus warns that if the church doesn’t take strong action, He’ll do it Himself, and His judgment is always harsher than ours. The same Jesus who said, *“Come to me”* also said *“Depart from me.”*

It’s frightening when Jesus says, *“I will fight against you.”* We’re going to lose that contest every time. Our arms are too short to box with God.

So, what are we left to do? It sounds harsh, but we can’t tolerate sin! Now that becomes a real conundrum. Do we look for it? Do we put on new antennas with sin radar? NO!

If we see it, we make sure what we see. We make sure we handle situations with Christian love and grace, yet with Christ in mind.

When we hear gossip, we stop it. When there’s bitterness and unforgiveness we try to help them, not condone it.

When someone is teaching something wrong, we examine it, talk to them, make sure they understand what they were doing. We seek to teach Christ and demonstrate Christ.

The ultimate goal is to help each person grow as a Christian. It’s hard work, it’s not safe, and it’s not without risk. It may cause you to lose a family member.

It may mean you can’t associate with someone who’s belittling and hurtful. It may mean you need to tell the world who Jesus is, knowing God will give you the power, courage, and strength to endure whatever comes your way.

We do what's right as a church, unless you'd rather fight with Jesus. Jesus has the right to make that judgment because He judges with perfect judgment.

That's what verse 12 means when Jesus said, *"These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword."*

This sword speaks of Christ's unswerving, unsparing judgment. He sees through our facades, and can examine our heart, soul, spirit, and mind.

He can reach into the deepest recesses of our being. He knows what's there, even when we don't.

In this letter, Jesus is talking about false teachers remaining in their positions, and if we allow them to stay in those positions, we're hurting the entire body.

We not only end up with a corrupt church, but with people who think they're safe when in fact they're hanging by a thread under the sword of God's judgment.

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Conclusion

Christ's message ends in a series of wonderful promises to those who overcome by faith.

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."*

In contrast to the pagans who offered hidden mysteries, Jesus offers something much greater to those who follow him.

Hidden manna speaks of personal communion with the Lord. Jesus is saying, *“I am greater than all the attractive temptations of the world. Those who eat the Living Bread and drink the Living Water will never hunger or thirst again.”*

The white stone speaks of acquittal and purity. When you were found not guilty in an ancient trial you were given a white stone. It was also given to those who were invited to attend a banquet. White was also the symbol of purity.

As to the new name, nobody knows for sure, because no living person has ever received it. That awaits us in heaven.

Ray Pritchard, of Keep Believing Ministries, wrote, *“Almost every married couple has pet nicknames for each other. Usually, the nicknames are funny. Sometimes they come from an event shared together.*

Sometimes they are romantic and never shared with anyone else. Those personal names cannot be shared not only for all the obvious reasons, but because they wouldn't make sense to anyone else.

Maybe that represents the best picture of what Christ promises. Yet, if there are millions of people in heaven, will we ever even see the Lord? Will He really know us?

Most of us struggle to keep track of a few names. How will we not get lost in the crowd when we get to heaven?

I believe this offers us a wonderful assurance. We will each be known by the Lord as a husband and wife knows one another.

As a parent knows their child. He will call us by a name that only we will know. In heaven no one will ever be lost in the crowd, despite the great numbers. We will be known.

I'm not sure how all this will work, but I believe it to be true. When we reach heaven, we will know Him, even as we are known by Him."

The Word of God, the teaching of God, must be taken seriously. It's not enough to just be right in our doctrine. We can't tolerate those who teach a false doctrine, and we won't tolerate it in this church.

This may not be a politically correct message, but it's a message we need to keep in mind if the church is to be the light of the world.

We can't help sinners by saying sin is not sinful. Christ came to save sinners, His grace and forgiveness gives us amazing hope.

May God help us to stand strong for the Gospel in this age of moral compromise.

If people call us narrow-minded, let us take it as a compliment and stay the course. Let's be as narrow as God's truth is narrow and as broad as God's grace is broad.