

Letters to the Churches 2-25-01
Pergamum

The Word of God has much to say to anyone who has an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying in these letters to the churches. The author is none other than the King of kings, the glorified and risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. If we don't listen, it is our great loss. Thank you Jesus for these words and what You want to say to the Church that has ears to hear.

Rev 2:12 (NIV)¹² "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

We have discussed the role of angel in the previous two letters but let us not forget the significance. Men, if you are in the word, the Lord will give someone something of Himself to share each week. That time with the Lord must take priority in our schedules or our schedules will push it aside.

Pergamum (the name of the city in later translations) is the neuter form of Pergamos (KJV) the feminine form of the name of the city. Both names were used but Pergamum was the more common. It is derived from the word that meant parchment. In the ancient world Pergamum developed the second largest library – surpassed only by Alexandria. It was in Pergamum that parchment was developed when Egypt boycotted the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Pergamum was not the city of trade that Ephesus and Smyrna were but it was the cultural center of Asia and had been the capital for 400 years. Here in this city that considered itself the guardian of Greek culture and the administrative center of Rome for Asia was a group of Christian believers.

Jesus identifies himself as the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. We have seen that mentioned in the letter to the Hebrews (4:12). In Ephesians 6 Paul tells us the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. In Revelation 1:16 this sword is seen in the mouth of the glorified Christ. I have said that I believe this description has something to do with the calling of this particular body of believers. The calling of this church may be to present the word of Christ clearly. The sharp edges leave no room for walking on both sides at once. The Hebrews reference (4:12) tells us it cuts between the soul and spirit, that is what is the will of man and what is the leading of God. This church is to bear a testimony of the words of Jesus. There is a revelation in his words of Kingdom thinking that is totally contrary to the thinking of the world. Pergamum was to display this in their words and in their lives. We are to display this Kingdom thinking in our words and in our lives.

Rev 2:13 (NIV)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.

I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. There are several historical reasons why Jesus may have said this. There was a great Temple to Zeus that looked like a throne. Pergamum was built on a conical hill and on an outcropping of rock on this hill this temple was built. Smoke from its offerings rose throughout the day. But few in this day regarded the Greek gods as something real to which one would devote their lives.

Pergamum was also known as the headquarters of the God of healing whose symbol was a snake, Asclepius. People came from far away to be treated for illness in this temple, which was the closest thing to a hospital in those days.

But as the rest of this verse goes on to tell us, the real seat of Satanic power was the Roman government. The word seat or throne in this case implies authority. In Rome some citizens were born with the right of the sword. At their word people could be executed. The procurator of the city had this power and apparently exercised it against Antipas. Satan is the Destroyer and loves to put fear into man. It may be that the seat referred to is the administrative seat of the Roman government over Asia. In the description of Christ as the One with the sword coming from his mouth the church here is encouraged that the real power of life and death is in the words of Jesus, not the metal sword wielded at the will of the procurator.

When tested to see if they were loyal to Rome the Christians here would not deny that Jesus was Lord by calling Caesar Lord. The wording seems to indicate there was a particular occasion when they were challenged but we have no record of what actually happened. We do know they would not deny his name. Even when Antipas was killed they did not fear death but remained faithful to proclaim the name of Jesus. We do not know anything about the death of Antipas except that there is a legend he was roasted alive in a bronze bull. We do have historical accounts of four other martyrs that followed him to heaven from this city. There is a great temptation presented by justifying thoughts to accept a compromise of our testimony to the name of Jesus! It is especially powerful when fear of physical harm is present. To compromise in a way that makes us acceptable to the world is always present. The term martyr is derived from the Greek word 'witness'. By the third century faithful witness and martyr were used interchangeably. What a testimony these believers had of staying faithful to the name of Jesus in the face of death.

One of the most common terms for a New Testament believer is hagios. To be holy means to be separate – different. It is not so much that we hate the world but the life of Christ in us has called us to another way of life. And so we stand out as different. But our flesh loves to fit in and be accepted. If you are a believer you should thank God when the difference Christ has made in your life stands out in contrast to the ways of the world. It is a chance for people to see the difference Jesus makes. I remember someone complaining to me about 'born again Christians' and the temptation not to say anything. But I resisted that fleshly desire to fit in and I told them, "I am one". I had to make an effort because my flesh was cringing to associate with what she was describing.

Now look again at the beginning of the verse. "I know where you live..." Jesus knows the trials in your neck of the woods. He knows the indignation of many Sedonans when you say you are a believer in Jesus. He knows the temptations of the American culture and of wealth that wants to replace Him in our hearts as our Provider and our security. Jesus knows where you live and the issues that face you in this town. Be like these in Pergamum who will not deny the name of Jesus either verbally or in action. Sedona is a town with a great spirit of gossip. It tries to enter our fellowship. Don't deny Jesus' name. Stay faithful to his word. Jesus knows where we live and his grace will be sufficient if we will receive it.

Rev 2:14 (NIV)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.

In spite of this great testimony, there is within this church in Pergamum, sin which needs to be repented of. We can have a great testimony and yet have present among us things that need to be repented of and forsaken. Notice not all of the fellowship there had this problem but when some do we all do as we are one. The truth of the word of Jesus needed to be brought forward to rebuke this compromise with the world. The Jerusalem counsel had told the early church not to eat food offered to idols. The reason was that along with the feasts in the temples of the sacrificed meat was the practice of temple prostitution. For those that had escaped this corrupt religion the temptation present there was not worth the inexpensive meal. The apostle tells us to flee youthful lusts. This is the same trick of Satan that Balaam encouraged Balak to use to almost defeat Israel.

Israel had come to the borders of the Promised Land and one of the kings of Midian, Balak, hired Balaam to speak curses against Israel. Every time this man tried to use his spiritual influence to curse the nation he ended up prophesying their victory and blessing them. Balak was furious and Balaam was missing out on the big bucks Balak was offering him. So later, Balaam tells Balak the only way to stop Israel is to turn them from their God and the best way to do that is to get the nice looking women to flirt with them, draw them away to worship Baal, and then have relations with them. Balaam knew how to get man to compromise. Satan who told Balaam that trick is up to the same thing today. Enticed by promised gratification of desire, men of God are leaving their calling and worshipping other gods. It is an epidemic in the church of Jesus. Jesus, who knows where we live, knows the enticement in our culture that lures men away just as the daughters of Midian did. God dealt with it in judgement by a plague that killed 24,000 until Phineas took a spear and ran it through one of these couples. See Num. 25

This temptation has done devastating damage to three of the churches of the Verde Valley. It has given people an excuse to deny the name of Christ and encouraged others to follow their wicked example. It destroys because it is of the Destroyer. It is his idea! Stay away from it! Don't entertain it for a moment. This is serious stuff. If you have given any place to it in your mind repent of it and determine you will not compromise in that area again. 2 Peter 2 has much to say about this spirit and I encourage you to read it. I don't want to go there right now because we would be here all afternoon – it is a subject in itself of false apostles which we briefly touched on the message to Ephesus. It is enough right now just to say some men claim to be called of God to teach in the church of Jesus Christ but they have a message that is not the sharp two-edged sword. It is a word of justification and compromise with evil. God will not bless us if we tolerate that.

Rev 2:15 (NIV)¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Apparently the Nicolaitans also held followed that same compromise. We have mentioned how the word means 'to rule the people'. They claimed to be from the deacon Nicolous, one of the seven, the first Gentile to hold an office in the church. It is more likely they

twisted some of his teaching to justify their compromises. Abuse of authority and power go hand in hand with compromise and sexual licentiousness. You see it in the leadership of nearly every cult. You see it in the church. It is as if these evils are somehow one spirit of evil drawing people to the lie of gratification that is destruction in disguise.

Rev 2:16 (NIV)¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Repent! When there is evil among us there is but one course of action to take, repentance. The church at Pergamum was guilty of allowing compromises to go on without being confronted by the Word of God. Perhaps that was in the name of love or tolerance, but the church had made it very clear, the apostles said it was wrong. Luke's letter of Acts was available to them to read. The very word that they are to be a testimony of will be their destruction. If we will not yield to the world and stay faithful to it, it will be a testimony against us. The word can bless and encourage us or it can judge us.

Rev 2:17 (NIV)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.

These promises to the overcomers who are willing to hear are so encouraging. I'm sure it was a wonderful encouragement to these brothers and sisters in Pergamum. The meaning must have been very clear to them but today there are dozens of different interpretations. I share mine with you but they are just my thoughts not a revelation from God. If you would like to hear a few other interpretations I would be glad to share them with you. The hidden manna – we know Jesus is the bread from heaven (John 6) There is a deeper revelation of Jesus for those who are willing to hear, those who overcome.

The Christians of the first century often changed their name to match with something of the new character Christ had given them. Imagine Jesus giving you this white stone upon which is your new name. I am waiting to take that stone in my hand and read what He would call me. Hear what the Spirit says to us today.

(The most commonly accepted interpretation for the manna is the legend of Jeremiah hiding the manna in the golden bowl in the ark before it was captured. It was said that when the Messiah would set up his kingdom the manna would be replaced. Thus to taste of the hidden manna was to partake the Kingdom. The white stone is thought to be the acquittal stone of the courts of the day. The white stone says God does not condemn you. Black meant you were condemned. The name on the stone is God's name. In that day to know one's secret name meant you had an influence on them. It could also refer to a stone that was the guarantee of certain privileges. This stone was called a tessera.)