

THE THINGS PRESENT, REVELATION, 2:1-3:22

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM, REVELATION 2:12-17

A. Destination - Pergamum (2:12a), ***And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:***

1. Background

- a. Pergamum was located about 16 miles from the Aegean Sea beside the Caicus River Valley. It was forty-five miles north of Smyrna and 75 miles north of Ephesus.
- b. It was an ancient city of Mysia, seat of an independent kingdom from 280 B.C. to 130 B.C., and the capital of the Roman province of Asia from 133 B.C. until the 2nd Century A.D.
- c. There were numerous pagan cults in Pergamum where the people worshiped Athena, Asclepius, Dionysus, and Zeus.
- d. William Barclay, *Pergamum regarded itself as the custodian of the Greek way of life and of Greek worship* . . . Asclepius was the god of healing, and his temples were the nearest thing to hospitals in the ancient world. From all over the world, people flocked to Pergamum for relief from their sicknesses.
- e. The only Asian temple to the imperial cult of Rome was built in Pergamum. It was erected in honor of Caesar Augustus who reigned when Jesus was born.
- f. It had a university with a library of over 200,000 books (second only to the library in Alexandria) and is the place where skin (pergamena or parchment) instead of papyrus was used for writing books. Charles Ryrie notes the importance of the transition to parchment, *Papyrus, which disintegrates over a relatively short period of time, was replaced by long-lasting skins. This is evidence of the providence of God, for otherwise we would have far fewer copies of ancient manuscripts of the New Testament.*
- g. Michael Wilcock, *If Ephesus was the New York of Asia, Pergamum was its Washington, for there the Roman imperial power had its seat of government.*

2. Progress of the Gospel

- a. There was a Jewish presence in Pergamum as early as 60 B.C. John Barry notes, *John's message to Pergamum assumes an audience with a deep knowledge of Jewish Scripture and traditions.*
- b. It is unknown when Christianity reached Pergamum but it was probably in the middle of the 1st century through the ministry of the Apostle Paul who spent three years in Ephesus.
- c. There was great pressure on Christians to submit to the imperial cult and compromise their monotheistic convictions.
- d. John Barry, *Festivals held by trade guilds were part of city's ordinary life and involved paying respect to the guilds' patron deities. Refusal to participate would have resulted in economic and social marginalization, if not outright persecution.*

B. The Lord (2:12b), ***The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.***

1. William Barclay, *The risen Christ is called the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. Roman governors were divided into two classes—those who had the ius gladii, the right of the sword, and those who did not. Those who had the right of the sword had the power of life and death; on their word a person could be executed on the spot. In terms of worldly power, the proconsul, who had his headquarters at Pergamum, had the ius gladii, the right of the sword, and at any moment he might use it against any Christian; but the letter tells Christians not to forget that the last word is still with the risen Christ, who has the sharp two-edged sword. The power of Rome might be satanically powerful; but the power of the risen Lord is even greater.*
2. John Walvoord, *The sword is a symbolic representation of the Word of God's twofold ability to separate believers from the world and to condemn the world for its sin. It was the sword of salvation as well as the sword of death.*
3. Charles Ryrie, *The two-edged sword is the symbol of the word of Christ, the assurance of judgment on the basis of absolute truth.*
4. Kendell Easley, *What if Christ's enemies are found among those who profess his name but have actually turned astray to heresy? He will turn that same sword against them (v. 16).*
5. Grant Osborne, *By Christ's opening words, therefore, the city stands corrected: it is not the Roman governor but Christ who actually carries out just judgments. It is Jesus' authority as the true and final wielder of the sword that actually will bring justice to the world.*

C. Commendation (2:13), *I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.*

1. The Lord acknowledged their difficult circumstances.
 - a. Twice in verse 13 Pergamum is referred to as the place where Satan resides.
 - b. There are a number of views concerning why Pergamum was identified as "Satan's throne."
 - 1) The worship of Asclepius was centered in Pergamum. Asclepius was pictured by the image of a snake which could connect him to Satan.
 - 2) The altar of Zeus was on the acropolis of Pergamum. Zeus was considered the chief god.
 - 3) Pergamum had numerous temples of gods with an intensely pagan culture.
 - 4) As noted earlier, Pergamum was an official center of the imperial cult.
 - c. Comments
 - 1) Mark Hitchcock, *The presence of this impressive altar to Zeus, and its prominence in the city, made Pergamum a uniquely pagan place to such an extent that it was as if Satan had set up his headquarters there.*
 - 2) Kendell Easley, *In Smyrna, the "synagogue of Satan" was Jewish; in Pergamum, the "throne of Satan" was pagan.*
 - 3) Grant Osborne, . . . *most interpreters agree that the best option is the imperial cult, the major difficulty behind the letter. Emperor worship most directly caused persecution in that place and time.*
 - 4) Charles Ryrie, *"Satan's throne" refers to pagan Pergamum's worship either of the Roman emperor . . . or of the Greek gods in the temple or of Zeus at his altar on the Acropolis (or all three).*
2. The Lord commended them for their steadfast faith in Christ.
 - a. *Did not deny my faith* is better translated *did not deny faith in me.*
 - b. Thomas Constable, *The Pergamum Christians had held firmly to their commitment to Jesus Christ and their witness for Him even though they lived in one of Satan's strongholds.*
 - c. John Walvoord, *The saints there were commended for being true, even when Antipas (which means "against all") was martyred.*
 - d. Warren Wiersbe, *Like their brothers and sisters in Smyrna, the believers in Pergamos had suffered persecution, and one of their men had died for the faith. In spite of intense suffering, this church had remained true to God. They refused to drop incense on the altar and say, "Caesar is Lord."*
 - e. Grant Osborne, *The major strength of the church in Pergamum was their witness. In all of the pressure, they remained true to Christ's name. The verb "remain true" means to hold firm to Jesus, to live up to their responsibility and resist the lure of their pagan environment. In other words, they refused to renounce their faith.*
 - f. William Barclay, *We may feel it would be very much easier to be a Christian in some other place and in some other circumstances; but the duty of Christians is to witness for Christ where life has set them . . . So many are prepared to demonstrate their Christianity in Christian circles but are equally prepared to play it down in circles where Christianity is met with opposition.*
3. *even in the days of Antipas*
 - a. The church at Pergamum experienced persecution before the church in Smyrna.
 - b. John Walvoord, *The saints there were commended for being true, even when Antipas (which means "against all") was martyred.*
 - c. J. Ramsey Michaels, . . . *Antipas, possibly the first Christian martyr in Asia . . .*
 - d. Frederick Tatford, *Antipas is said to have been a dentist and a physician, but the Aesculapiades suspected that he was propagating Christianity secretly and they accused him of disloyalty to Caesar. He was condemned to death and was shut up in a brazen (or copper) bull, which was then heated until it was red-hot.*
 - e. Kendell Easley, *The devil had used his stronghold in the city to make life miserable for the Christians. One of their number, a faithful witness to the gospel named Antipas (otherwise unknown in the New Testament), had made the great sacrifice of being put to death. While believers in other places might have buckled in the face of such pressure, Christ complimented the believers who did not renounce your faith in me.*
 - f. Grant Osborne, *We know little about Antipas; he seems to be the only one martyred in Pergamum to this date, perhaps in the whole province. Antipas certainly was treated as a hero here, and he became a major example for the other Christians of faithfulness in the face of the most severe persecution.*
 - g. William Barclay, *The risen Christ calls Antipas my faithful martus. We have translated that as martyr; but martus is the normal Greek word for witness. In the early Church, to be a martyr and to be a witness were one and the same thing.*

D. Condemnation (14-15), ***But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.***

1. John Walvoord, *The Christians at Pergamum had been true to God under severe testing but had compromised their testimony in other ways* . . .
2. Jesus called out the church at Pergamum because some accepted false teaching.
3. Warren Wiersbe, *Satan had not been able to destroy them by coming as the roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), but he was making inroads as the deceiving serpent. A group of compromising people had infiltrated the church fellowship, and Jesus Christ hated their doctrines and their practices.*
4. He specified two groups.
 - a. The teaching of Balaam
 - 1) Charles Ryrie, *Balaam (Num. 22:1-24:25), finding himself unable to curse God's people, instructed Balak king of Moab to corrupt them through immorality and idolatry so that God eventually judged them. His doctrine is the teaching of compromise in life.*
 - 2) John Walvoord, *Balaam had been guilty of counseling King Balak to cause Israel to sin through intermarriage with heathen women and through idol-worship (cf. Num. 22-25; 31:15-16). Intermarriage with heathen women was a problem in Pergamum where any social contact with the world also involved worship of idols.*
 - 3) Thomas Constable, *The pagans in Pergamum likewise were evidently encouraging the Christians to join in their pagan feasts and the sexual immorality that accompanied those feasts. By participating some in the church had given tacit approval to Balaam's teaching.*
 - 4) Charles Savelle, *The main facet of the doctrine of Balaam which is being promulgated in Churches today is the teaching that [equal] future blessings and rewards have been set aside for every Christian solely on the basis of Christ's finished work on Calvary and the Christian's positional standing 'in Christ.' Thus, all Christians—regardless of their conduct during the present time—will receive crowns and positions of power and authority with Christ in the [millennial] kingdom. However, the teaching throughout the Word of God is to the contrary. The Israelites did not sin with immunity, and neither can Christians. Sin in the camp of Israel resulted in the Israelites being overthrown in the wilderness, short of the goal of their calling. And it will be no different for Christians.*
 - 5) Grant Osborne, *As Balaam showed the Moabites how to lead Israel into sin, so the false teachers were showing these Christians how to fall into sin. They were throwing a stumbling block into the church that led the people into apostasy.*
 - b. The teaching of the Nicolaitans
 - 1) Charles Ryrie, *As noted earlier, the doctrine of the Nicolaitans may be the same teaching (i.e. compromise) or it may be an unwarranted exaltation of the clergy.*
 - 2) Michael Wilcock, *Both the sins mentioned in verse 14 may be taken literally. Both appeared in the time of Balaam, both reappeared in the New Testament church (1 Cor 5 and 8), and the pathway to them is the same kind of temptation which is typical of worldliness in any age: 'Where is the harm in it? Everyone else does it; why shouldn't you?'*
 - 3) Thomas Constable, *The Nicolaitans evidently regarded these sins as acceptable under the pretense of Christian liberty (cf. v. 6).*
 - 4) Warren Wiersbe, *Why did this bit of ancient history apply to the believers at Pergamos? Because a group in that church said, "There is nothing wrong with being friendly to Rome. What harm is there in putting a pinch of incense on the altar and affirming your loyalty to Caesar?" Antipas refused to compromise and was martyred; but others took the "easy way" and cooperated with Rome.*
 - 5) Kendell Easley, *Christ came to abolish the Law; part of the Law was the command about adultery; therefore, those in Christ are free to engage in whatever sexual relations they find "meaningful." (Such teachings would appeal to those from pagan religious backgrounds in which promiscuous sex was accepted as a routine part of life.)*
 - 6) Grant Osborne, *The Nicolaitans were apparently saying that there was nothing wrong with participating in the imperial cult or the idolatrous trade guild banquets, but such accommodations constituted idolatry . . . Syncretism is also common today. People see no problem embracing, for example, biblical doctrines on Christ and salvation and also accepting such things as abortion or homosexuality, even though the Bible is clear on those issues.*
 - 7) William Barclay, *The fault of the Nicolaitans was that they were following a policy of compromise solely to save themselves from trouble.*

- c. Comments
 - 1) Warren Wiersbe, *The congregation or the individual Christian that compromises with the world just to avoid suffering or achieve success is committing “spiritual adultery” and being unfaithful to the Lord.*
 - 2) Kendell Easley, . . . *the false teachers in Pergamum must have been teaching a subtle distortion: violation of conscience is quite all right, especially if there is not a clear Christian teaching at stake.*
- E. Exhortation (2:16), ***Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.***
- 1. A call to repentance
 - a. Charles Ryrie, *The call to repentance is coupled with a warning of judgment on the basis of the Word of God.*
 - b. Thomas Constable, *If the erring believers would not judge themselves and repent, they could anticipate God’s judgment (cf. 1 Cor. 11:31).*
 - c. Kendell Easley, *To summarize, some believers in Pergamum were tolerating falsehood by teaching that in morals, violation of the conscience or of the marriage bond is perfectly all right. Christ responds vehemently, I will have none of this.*
 - d. Grant Osborne, *To fail to take a strong stance against the heretics would constitute sin and invite divine judgment.*
 - 2. The unrepentant will face *the sword of my mouth.*
 - a. Kendell Easley, *The distinction between ‘you’ and ‘them’ is important here. The Balaam-like teachers and Nicolaitans are not truly part of the people of God, even though they have succeeded in infiltrating the congregation.*
 - b. William Barclay, *The sword of Christ is the word of Christ . . . In the word of Christ, there is conviction of sin . . . In the word of Christ, there is invitation to God . . . In the word of Christ, there is assurance of salvation ;*
 - c. John Walvoord, *Christ would contend with them, using the sword of His mouth (cf. 1:16; 2:12; 19:15, 21). This again is the Word of God sharply judging all compromise and sin.*
 - d. Warren Wiersbe, *Antipas had felt the sword of Rome, but the church at Pergamos would feel the sword of Christ—the Word (Heb. 4:12)—if they did not repent. This is not a reference to our Lord’s return but to a present judgment that comes to a church when it is disobedient to the Word of God.*
 - e. Thomas Constable, *They would die by the sword proceeding from Christ’s mouth. Balaam died, ironically, by the Israelites’ sword (Num. 31:8). This judgment would be by the unyielding standard of God’s revealed Word that clearly condemns such behavior. Having taken sides with the enemy, they could expect God to oppose them in His war against evil.*
 - f. Grant Osborne, *This war will be “against them,” meaning the wrath will be directed at the heretics rather than the believers. But it will still be a judgment of the church, for the true followers allowed the cult to remain among them and even more seriously allowed some of them to join it.*
- F. Promise (17), ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.***
- 1. A promise given to those who hear and conquer (overcome).
 - a. Jesus emphasized a role of the Holy Spirit in communicating truth to churches which was emphasized in verse 11, as well.
 - b. As noted in verse 7, conquerors (overcomers) are all believers but there are rewards for faithful service.
 - c. John Walvoord, *The final exhortation to individuals, as in the messages to other churches, is again addressed to those who are willing to hear.*
 - d. Grant Osborne, *The call to listen carefully centers on the Holy Spirit as the source of the message and on the necessity that every church apply the prophetic material to themselves. We must ask, “Have I tolerated false teaching? How concerned am I for biblical truth?”*
 - 2. Conquerors will receive several gifts.
 - a. *hidden manna*
 - 1) Charles Ryrie, *Hidden manna is the sufficiency of Christ in contrast to the allurements of the world that compromise offered. Manna replaces meats offered to idols.*
 - 2) John Walvoord, *Whereas Israel received physical food, manna, the church receives spiritual food (John 6:48–51).*

- 3) Kendell Easley, *The ancient Israelites had “hidden” a pot of their divinely given bread in their ark of the covenant. Jewish tradition held that this manna had been miraculously preserved and would be multiplied to feed God’s people when the Messiah came (Exod. 16:32–35; 2 Macc. 2:5–7).*
 - 4) Thomas Constable, *The Christians in Pergamum did not need the food of pagan festivals since they already had much better food. Christians feed spiritually on Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6:48–51), who is the real Manna and who is hidden from sight now.*
- b. *a white stone*
- 1) Charles Ryrie, *The meaning of the white stone with the new name written is derived from either or both of two customs of the day. The first was that of judges, who determined a verdict by placing in an urn a white and black pebble. If the white one came out, it meant acquittal; thus the white stone would mean the assurance that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The other custom was the wearing of amulets as good luck charms around the neck. If this is the reference, then the stone is the Lord’s way of reminding the people that they had Him and needed no other thing.*
 - 2) Mark Hitchcock, on another possibility, . . . *it was common in that day for a ticket to the theater, a special banquet, or some other event to be issued in the form of a white stone with a person’s name on it. These tessara stones admitted the bearer to the event. While certainty on this view is impossible, I believe that given the context, which speaks of eating the hidden manna, the reference to an admission ticket to the future messianic banquet makes the most sense. Every believer will receive his or her special ticket to the messianic feast with a new name written on it that no one knows but the individual and the Lord.*
 - 3) Michael Wilcock, *Since the context speaks of feasts of idol-meat and the feast of manna which God spread for Israel in the desert, perhaps the reference is to an ancient use of square stones as tickets of admission to some public entertainment. So the promise of eternal life which ends each of the first two Letters is repeated here in terms appropriate to the Christian who will not compromise with worldly pleasures and idol-meat banquets.*

CONCLUSION

- Thomas Constable, *This letter pictures a church married to the world rather than to Christ.*
- John Walvoord, *Taken as a whole, the message to the church in Pergamum is a warning against compromise in morals or teaching and against deviating from the purity of doctrine required of Christians.*
- Charles Swindoll, . . . *we can understand the big picture: if you remain faithful and take a stand for truth and morality, the result will be great reward from Christ upon His return.*
- Grant Osborne, *Our final reward will be a new name, a new body, and a new heavens and new earth. Newness will characterize the start of eternity (Rev 21:5).*