

# The Seven Churches of Revelation

Lesson 3  
Rev. 2:12-17

As we move to the third of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2 and 3 we travel about eighty kilometres north from Smyrna to the city of Pergamum. This was the second oldest city in the Roman province of Asia and a centre for emperor worship and idolatry. It was home to the world's second largest library with some 200,000 volumes.

Pergamum housed an entire complex of idol temples including a temple for emperor worship and a famous altar for Zeus.<sup>1</sup> Temples were also present for Athena, Dionysus, and Asclepius who was viewed as the saviour from sin and disease. Asclepius was depicted by a snake winding around a pole. An ancient writer said of Pergamum, it was "given to idolatry more than all Asia."<sup>2</sup> Certainly it is easy to see why Jesus says this is where Satan's throne was located (Rev. 2:13).



*Reconstruction of the Pergamum Altar at the Berlin Museum*

The apostle Paul passed through this area on his second missionary journey, but there is no record of Paul preaching here. Some believe he founded this church during his time in Ephesus where the gospel was preached throughout Asia (Acts 19:10); however none of this is certain.

## The Church at Pergamum *"The Compromising Church"*

To the church at Pergamum Jesus describes himself as: ***"him who has a sharp two-edged sword."*** The sword refers to the Word of God which is described this way in **Hebrews 4:12**: ***"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*** (See Eph. 6:17).

Description Christ gives himself to the church at Pergamum

*"him who has the sharp two-edged sword." (Rev. 2:12)*

<sup>1</sup>The Pergamum altar was a 35.6 metres wide and 33.4 metres deep. The front staircase was 29 metres wide and the altar was adorned with great carvings of battles between the gods and their opponents. The altar was built between 166 - 156 B.C.

<sup>2</sup> [https://bible.org/seriespage/4-pergamum-compromising-church#P3\\_483](https://bible.org/seriespage/4-pergamum-compromising-church#P3_483)

Jesus says in John 12:48 that his word, which he spoke, will judge the one who rejects him on the last day. The Roman proconsul wielded the sword of Roman authority and life and death in the empire. The sword of Jesus however carries with it eternal life and death.

The sword (scripture) is two-edged because it leads some to Christ as it convicts them of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8), while others are condemned by their refusal to obey what it says. In this way the sword cuts two ways and proves it to be both offensive and defensive.



### **1. Whose responsibility is it to wield this two-edged sword?**

## **Commendation to the Church at Pergamum**

The church at Pergamum was commended in three ways. First, they were faithful even though they lived where Satan's throne was located. To say that Satan's "throne" was in Pergamum indicates his power in that city. It is more difficult to live for Christ in some places and some times than others.

### **2. Why is Satan more at home in some geographical locations than others?**

### **3. Where does Satan dwell today?**

Second, the Christians in Pergamum held fast the name of Christ. They were not swayed into rejecting the name, trustworthiness, and authority of Christ. In no way did they deny him.

Third, they were steadfast even when their brother Antipas was martyred. We do not know the identity of this "Antipas." Some believe him to be a single member of the church; perhaps an elder or evangelist. Since the name "Antipas" means "against all" some believe the name is representative of all in the church at Pergamum who stood as faithful witnesses against those who opposed them.

Most likely Antipas was an individual member, of the church, who paid for his faithfulness with death.<sup>3</sup> There is a historical legend (perhaps fiction) that Antipas was roasted alive inside a hollow life sized bronze bull.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is called the "faithful witness" in Revelation 1:5, so having this same designation applied to Antipas is high praise indeed.

### **4. How are Christians able to remain steadfast in the face of martyrdom?**

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<sup>3</sup> Smith, James E. Behold! The Revelation of Jesus. Lulu, 2008, pp. 53-54

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.antipas.net/whois.htm>

## Rebuke to the Church at Pergamum

The Christians in Pergamum did not flee the city for safety. They were faithful in the midst of Satanic activity. They did not deny the name of Christ. They kept the faith even in the midst of martyrdom. As impressive as these commendations are, the Lord has some severe words of rebuke to the church in Pergamum.

First, they had **some** who held to the teachings of Balaam. In the book of Numbers we find the story of Balaam who was a diviner who sold his services to Israel's enemy. When God prevented Balaam from pronouncing a curse on Israel, Balaam told Balak the king of Moab how to stop Israel through pagan religious rites and by using Moabite women to entice the Israel men into idolatrous feasts and sexual immorality.<sup>5</sup>



Intermarriage with the women of Moab was designed to destroy the identity of God's people who are called to be holy or separate from the world. Numbers 31:16 describes this saying that Balak caused the Israelites to act treacherously against the Lord. Because of this idolatry and immorality God disciplined Israel putting 24,000 to death through a plague. Likewise, eating food sacrificed to idols was expressly forbidden in Acts 15:29.

### 5. What happened to Balaam in Numbers 31:8?

Apparently some in the church at Pergamum allowed for the practice of immorality and idolatry and a lenient attitude toward sin. The Apostle Peter had prophesied this would take place (2 Peter 2:15). A tolerant view of sin was a stumbling block in the church enticing others to be immoral. A faithful church **cannot** tolerate idolatry and immorality to exist in its midst (1 Cor. 6:12-20).

Second, some in the church held to the teachings of the Nicolaitans. The church at Ephesus had been commended for rejecting the teachings of the Nicolaitans, but not so in Pergamum. While we do not know the exact nature of the the teachings of the Nicolaitans we do know that Ignatius wrote about AD 107 that they were lovers of pleasure, men who were devoid of the Holy Spirit, and corrupters of the flesh.<sup>6</sup>

Only some were teaching the error of the Nicolaitans, but the doctrine threatened to spread. Both overt sinful actions and false teachings are to be rejected within the church. While it was only **some** in the church who were involved in these practices, it was fully capable of destroying the whole church.

### 6. Why is it that **some** who are immoral or doctrinally unsound within a church can destroy the whole?

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 55-54.

<sup>6</sup> See lesson 1 in this series, page 4.

## The Call for the Church at Pergamum to Repent

The church at Pergamum is commanded to repent. If they refused to repent then the Lord would soon come and make war against them with the sword of his mouth. This may seem harsh since most of the Christians were not involved in idolatry, immorality, and false doctrine. However, the tolerant attitude of the church in Pergamum would lead to the destruction of the entire congregation if they did not repent.

The sword of the mouth of Jesus refers to the words he has spoken. It is obedience to truth of Scripture that will reward or condemn. God calls his people to be holy and obedient to what he has commanded.

### 7. Why does the Lord describe his coming as “war”?

#### It's Time to Hear

Now was the time for the church to use their ears to listen and obey the word of Christ. There are two promises made to the one who listens and conquers.

First, ***“To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna...”*** This stands in contrast to those who followed the teachings of Baalam and ate of food sacrificed to idols. The one who conquers or overcomes will eat of hidden manna.

Jesus said in ***John 6:49-51***, *Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*” (See John 6:31-33).



The hidden aspect of this manna comes from the fact that not all will find it. ***2 Corinthians 4:3-4*** *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*

In the Old Testament manna was hidden away in the Ark of the Covenant. Jesus is now the manna or bread of life. He is hidden only to those who by their sin and refusal to repent cannot see him.

Second, ***“To the one who conquers ... 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.”*** The word translated as “stone” literally means “a small stone” or “a pebble”<sup>7</sup> and was used in those days in a court as they were cast to show condemnation or acquittal. A black

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/psephos>

stone meant guilt and condemnation. A white stone meant innocence and acquittal. Those Christians who are faithful metaphorically receive a white stone by the Lord announcing innocence. White in the Revelation always means purity or something belonging to heaven.

The gift of a new name indicates a change of character or position before God. This may refer to the more intimate fellowship a Christian will experience with God in heaven.<sup>8</sup> The new name we will receive is a mystery we cannot fully comprehend until we receive it in heaven.

**8. What else that is new will only be experienced by Christians in heaven according to Revelation 3:12; 5:9; 21:1; and 21:5?**

Promise #3 to the Churches

"To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna"

Promise #4 to the Churches

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Questions for the Upcoming Week

1. Consider how you are handling the double-edged sword. Are you giving it the respect it deserves? What if anything do you need to change in your relationship to the Word of God?
2. Since our sin or the sin of others can affect the whole church, what steps can be taken to help develop faithfulness in the life of every Christian?
3. What can you do to help others find the "hidden manna?"
4. It is a mystery, but what do you think the new name of Revelation 2:17 might be?

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, p. 57.