

LET THE BIBLE SPEAK, SERIES

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Letter To The Church at Pergamum

Pergamum was built on a large cone shaped hill overlooking a broad and fertile valley about thirty miles north of Smyrna, some fifteen miles inland from the sea. In 133 B.C. the city was bequeathed to Rome, by king Attalus III. Pergamum was known as the royal city of Asia and served as the political capital of the province for more than two hundred years. The acropolis of Pergamum was adorned with beautiful state buildings. The city also boasted of a library of two hundred thousand volumes, second only in size to the one in Alexandria, Egypt. As early as 29 B.C. a temple was erected to Roma and Augustus, at the time being the only temple of the imperial cult in all Asia. The city had the distinction of being three times named temple-warden of the state religion, before the honor was transferred to Ephesus. Beside the imperial cult there were four patron deities of the city, Zeus and Athena of Greek origin, and Dionysus and Aesculapius of Asian origin.

Christianity in Pergamum was challenged by three distinct types of pagan religion: popular Asiatic, cultured Greek, and official Roman. Official Roman or emperor worship was more political than religious. During the reign of Domitian it was made a test of loyalty to the state.

The sword, recognized by the Romans as a symbol of authority and judgment, belonged in this case to Christ and not Rome.

Heb. 4:12 "For the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any..."

Eph. 6:17 the Christian clad as one of the Lord's army is to take "the sword of the Spirit" which is the word of God.

It is with this sword that Christ brings Judgment to those nations and people who reject God and his word.

" I know where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is; and thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwelleth."

Just as the Lord had known the works of the two previous churches, he knows the oppressive conditions under which the church in Pergamum had to live and the great obstacles it had to face.

They are encouraged to take confidence in the fact that it is Christ and not Rome who wields the sword.

The significance of "Satan's throne" is a reference to the conditions in Pergamum at that time. It was the political capital of the province and the seat of pagan deities and emperor worship. All these elements combined to produce an oppressive Satanic atmosphere. The

persecution in Smyrna had come from the Jews, here it is coming from an imperial and pagan source.

They held fast the Lord's name and did not deny the faith. A great and worthy commendation. These people, in the face of severe opposition, refused to confess "Lord Caesar", remaining true to the name of the Lord. The name of Christ stands for all he represents:

Deity---he was the Son of God
Authority---"All authority is given unto me..."
Lordship over all---King of Kings and Lord of Lords

Not denying the faith, means that they stood firm for all revealed truth. They stood fast in the faith. "the faith once delivered".

Antipas---We know nothing more of this good man. He was a beloved martyr of the Lord. He had been faithful to what he had seen and heard about Jesus. He surely was not the only one, who had so suffered, but was probably the first of many. It may be that he was a member of this congregation i.e. "among you", or it could have been that he had been brought to Pergamum from another place to stand trial and eventual execution. If that were the case, this church stood beside him during this time.

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication."

The Lord now turns his attention to those things that he condemns in this church. It may well be that only a small minority of the church is guilty of these sins, nevertheless, since "a little leaven can leaven the whole lump, it is necessary to point out and condemn this wrong. The teaching cannot be tolerated. Such teaching left uncorrected, spreads.

A point we should all remember. If only two or three in a church are teaching and practicing things that are contrary to the truth, it must be dealt with before the Lord will approve the church. It may be said of a number of churches "thou hast some". Some who deny the plain teaching of scripture about worship, fellowship, work of the Holy Spirit, relationship to unscriptural teaching and worship etc.

The teaching of Balaam: When Israel came to the border of Moab and Balaam found himself unable to curse the people of God for Barak, king of Moab (Num.23,24), he counseled Barak to send forth the daughters of Moab and entice the men to join them in their lascivious worship (Num.31:16). In doing this, he was able to accomplish what otherwise he could not have. Balaam's compromise was a tragic mistake. The spirit of compromise in matters of wrong doing is always a mistake. The error of this man is described in the following points: (1) he taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before Israel. This word "stumbling block" identifies that part of a trap on which the bait is

placed, which when disturbed causes the trap to spring, thus ensnaring the victim. (Example: mouse trap-cheese) Balaam set a trap before the children of Israel, causing many of them to perish. The analogy is: Some in the church at Pergamum were setting a trap that would eventually ensnare the entire church if not corrected. This is always the result of compromise in such matters. (2) "To eat things sacrificed to idols" involves more than the eating of meats as discussed by Paul in 1Cor. 8-10). Included was the actual participation in the idolatrous worship itself. (3) "And to commit fornication," describes what was frequently a part of the pagan ceremony. Those who followed the teachings of Balaam and compromised the truth for idolatry made a grievous mistake. One with eternal ramifications.

2Peter 2:15 "Which have forsaken the right way and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;"

Such mistakes had to be dealt with. "There is no point at which the church can tolerate compromise or wink at sin when the name and faith of the Lord Jesus are involved." Homer Hailey.

So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner.

Some claim that the doctrine of Balaam and that of the Nicolaitans are identical. However, the phrase "in like manner" would indicate that they were two separate groups. As we have noted previously, there is little information on the Nicolaitans and their beliefs and practices. It may be that the two groups had some things in common. The difference between the church at Ephesus and Pergamum was the difference between rejection and compromise. Ephesus hated the deeds of these people "some" in Pergamum had taken a compromising position toward their teaching.

Repent therefore; or else I come to thee quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

The Lord does not tolerate the sin of compromise in the church.

With him it is always repent or perish. "Repent or else I will come..."

It is important to notice that the command is to the entire church. Those who had adopted the ungodly teaching and practices of Balaam must repent. Those in the church who had manifested a compromising spirit toward this teaching must repent and take a firm stand against it.

No church can afford to tolerate such a disposition as that manifested by the few in Pergamum.

Such a disposition is characteristic of far too many in the church today. Without doubt it is responsible for the doctrinal weakness we see in many.

The alternative is fearful to contemplate. The Lord will come and make war against the church by executing judgment against those who have compromised.

Just as Balaam had been slain by the sword of those whom he sought to curse (Num. 31:8), so these in Pergamum would be dealt with who had reduced the word of God to that of a carnal religion.

The judgment of God was so complete that neither the Nicolaitans nor the Balaamites left documents or institutions behind.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches. To him that overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written which no one knoweth but him that receiveth it.

An illusion to the manna given the children of Israel in the wilderness. The idea being that God abundantly supplied the needs of his people. The feasts in the idol temples could not compare with the feast of one who "eats the bread of life" (John 6:35). Jesus was the true manna come down from heaven. This manna was "hidden" because it was unknown to the pagan world. It here represents the exclusive spiritual blessings the Lord will give to his faithful servants.

So also today, that upon which the people of God feed is unknown, overlooked, and unimportant to those of the world. The satisfaction of serving Him remains a mystery to those living in sin.

Interpretations regarding the white stone are almost as numerous as those who write about it. The word "stone" translates a word meaning "a small, worn, smooth stone; pebble." According to Thayer in ancient courts of justice the accused were condemned by black pebbles and acquitted by white. This word occurs only one other time in the New Testament, Acts 26:10, where Paul says "I give my vote (literally, my pebble for voting) against them." The white stone, perhaps in some way, pertains to the heavenly relationship and privileges, these people shared with the Lord. Some think it might have had reference to their complete acquittal before the Lord.

The new name seems to be an indication that only those in the Christian experience really know what God is, or what he gives. Those who are redeemed and victorious know what it means to belong to God, others just do not realize what it means to be so blessed.