

Revelation

*Part Eleven
Pergamos
(Revelation 2:12-17)*

With Study Questions

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Pergamos

(Revelation 2:12-17)

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³ "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas *was* My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. 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 to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives *it*' (Revelation 2:12-17).

Introduction

I am often asked the question, "When do you know that it's time to leave a church?" Leaving a church is a serious decision, and that is not an easy question to answer. It is a common practice, on Sundays when I am not at my own church, for me to worship with other congregations. It is also common for me not to agree with things I see and hear in many of the churches I visit (this also happens in my own church). At the same time, I need to be careful not to be so arrogant that I refuse to worship with brothers and sisters in Christ because I don't think they've reached a sufficient maturity level. I wouldn't want to be treated that way. Jesus also appears very patient with those who are immature in the faith.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now (John 16:12).

The blind man healed by Jesus didn't even know of the sinlessness of Jesus (John 9:25). Yet he displayed great faithfulness within the boundaries of his capacity. Of course, when Jesus found him, he was very ready to move forward in his faith. And this is really the question I ask when someone wants to know if they should leave their church. Not (so much) where your church currently is, but what is the direction of your church?

I think the same when asked about a potential spouse for one of my children or a member of our church. I am not as concerned with their current level of doctrinal soundness as I am in the direction they're taking and their humility before the word of God-before God Himself.

I open with this because what strikes me in this letter (a letter where Jesus commends the church for their courage in the midst of persecution), is that Jesus Himself threatens to fight against the church with the sword of His mouth. Even an otherwise faithful church has vulnerabilities and, if they fail to repent, may find themselves on the receiving end of Christ's judgments.

Pergamos

As we follow the Revelation through the Roman postal route in Asia Minor, Pergamos¹ is the furthest north. Pergamos was not the commercial center that we saw in Ephesus or Smyrna, but it was highly political and religious. It was replete with edifices, altars and artistic works of pagan gods. It had a library of 200,000 volumes at one time (the library was removed by Anthony to Egypt and given to Cleopatra then Alexandrian library, then later destroyed).

The very name of the city, Pergamos, is a cognate with the word 'parchment' since they invented parchment when Egypt denied them the import of papyrus. Through a series of political maneuvers and conniving, all the artifacts and property of Pergamos eventually became owned by Rome. Pergamos came to be known as the "city of political fornication." It was also the center of the imperial cult. If you wanted to show your patriotism, which was required to buy and sell and function in that society,

¹ The gender cannot be determined, *Pergamus* or *Pergamum*.

you needed to worship Caesar. Mind, body and soul must be dedicated to Caesar. It wasn't enough that your hand (labor) was his, your mind and heart must belong to him as well.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword (Revelation 2:12).

As the "angel" (pastor) of the church meditates upon the words of Christ and the message he is to bring to the congregation, Jesus will have him ponder the designation "**two-edged sword**" from chapter one. It is this very sword that Jesus threatens to bring against His own church if they continue down a wayward path (Revelation 2:16). What is this sword?

First and foremost, the sword is the word of God.

...and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:17).

The word of God, like truth itself, will either deliver us or it will judge us. If your church is not seeking to responsibly exegete (interpret) and surrender itself to the truth of God's word, it will soon find that it is not a church at all.

Interestingly enough, the sword can also be used to symbolize civil government.

For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil (Romans 13:4).

Simply stated, the civil authorities should use the sword of God's word to determine when and how to administer the sword of God's justice. Failure to do this has been the demise of many a nation.

I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne *is*. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas *was* My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells (Revelation 2:13).

The commendation this church receives from Christ is based, in part, on their difficult environment. **“Where Satan’s throne is”** and **“where Satan dwells”** tells us that Satan is merely a resident, he is ruling. How do we square this with what John recorded earlier, that Jesus is **“ruler over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5)?** The answer is not terribly difficult.

The fact that, at the time of John’s writing, **“the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19)** or that Satan is the **“god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4)** doesn’t make Satan God. A person can choose to make their porch-swing their god. It doesn’t make their porch-swing God. The fact that the religious and political leaders in the first century Roman Empire are serving Satan, doesn’t make Satan God. He’s just their god.

But let us appreciate and beware. An environment governed by Satan is going to be hostile to the church, hostile to the truth. I think it is a mistake, as is common in some Reformed circles today, to think that the world somehow consists of a “common kingdom” along with “Christ’s kingdom” that can mutually and peacefully coexist.

The kingdoms of this world will not acquiesce to some general equity bringing them into a natural uplifting of humanity, which includes Christian churches. How many times does that experiment have to fail before it is jettisoned? See the experiment during the time of Noah. No, the hope of the nations is to bow the knee to Christ, to trust in His sacrifice and yield to His wisdom.

At some level, the church at Pergamos knew this, and it cost them dearly. Pergamos was the first city of Asia Minor to demand emperor worship for commercial or economic rights. Antipas, Christ’s faithful witness (*witness* is synonymous with martyr, which came to express someone who had died for his/her faith) had already been killed. The heart of Satan’s throne or dwelling (the direction all human governments take) was likely emperor worship. This is one reason why we should pause when we see posters in the town square with giant paintings of the faces of politicians announcing that they are our political hope.

When we get into chapters twelve and thirteen, we will learn that the religious and political environment (so often assigned to some future maneuvering before the Second Coming) had already reached the level of beastliness. It is in this environment that Antipas becomes one of the early martyrs. But, as we learned last time, there will be more (Revelation 2:10).

What do we, today, learn from this? We learn that there is a direction that ungodly and unchecked governments will take when it rejects the truth of Christ. We also learn that the church is not to allow the sway of darkness to take root in her bosom. And the resisting of that darkness may cost us dearly. And if it doesn't cost us, our negligence will most assuredly bring that price tag to future generations. Along those lines, we read of Jesus' critique.

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth (Revelation 2:14-16).

A disease was festering in Pergamos. Today, we might call it religious liberalism. It's not an outright denial of the Christian faith, but a perverting of it. Dark directions for a church begin in very small increments. We read here of the doctrine of Balaam and what he taught Balak.

Briefly, Balak was the king of Moab, an enemy of Israel. He hires the prophet, Balaam to curse Israel which Balaam cannot do (not because he's not willing, but because won't allow it). Balaam, though not the most virtuous of prophets, can only bless Israel (Numbers 22-24). If you read Numbers, this seems to be the end of the story. But it isn't. Seven chapters later we read that Balaam, though he could not prophesy against Israel, could give Balak advice on how to ruin Israel. The advice revolved around religious idolatry and sexual immorality.

We might be surprised to find out how many of the world's pagan religions include sexual activity. This was, little doubt, the case in Pergamos, and it was making its way into the church. And the church, even the early church, should have known better. These were the very things the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:20) instructed the early church to abstain from.

Stumbling blocks (literally a stick holding a trap/box that is tripped by an animal) are in our society. But they will seek to make their way into the church. We are ever to be mindful, cautious, of these traps. They often

hover over our what constitutes healthy sexual relationships. There will also be a blurring of the roles of men and women in life and ministry. Even what is acceptable worship. Take a good look at the moral climate of your culture, then be looking for how it will seek to make inroads into you family and your church. One need merely look at the best-selling Christian books and the largest Christian churches in order to gauge how far off track we might be.

I recall speaking to a young man who was candidating to be a pastor. He was resisting the six-day creation view, but not so much on exegetical grounds. He indicated to me that his friends would not come to faith if he presented such a naïve view of the origins of the universe. This is not a legitimate reason to hold a position. Jesus is going to call those who hold the doctrine of Balaam to **“repent”** *metanoeson*. We know that word means a changing of the mind. You might ask, change your mind about what? Everything (where we’re from, where we’re headed, why we’re here, right wrong, the heart of our hope, everything).

What the church at Pergamos will find is that if they refuse to repent, they will find themselves on the wrong end of the indignation of Christ. He will **“fight against them”** with the sword of His mouth. That is, they will be judged by the truth of God’s word. They will find themselves on the wrong side of God’s history and, more importantly, eternity.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away (Matthew 24:35).

The word of God must ever be preached against a compromising church. And all churches, yours included, must ever be willing to repent. We spoke last time about hating the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, so we will not speak of that here. He concludes,

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 to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it’ (Revelation 2:17).

Once again, we see the call to persevere. Let the church hear (which includes obey) the Spirit rather than the world by which it is surrounded.

The world is to be sanctified through the church, not the church corrupted by the world.

“**Hidden manna**” is likely referring to Christ Himself. It is difficult for us to grasp the magnitude of the claim made by Jesus, while teaching about manna, to utter the words,

I am the bread which came down from heaven (John 6:41).

Truly, the Old Testament Scriptures bear witness of Christ (John 5:39).

History tells us the “**white stone**” was a ticket necessary to enter the festivals and banquets of the pagan gods. This may be a way to convey to us that there is another kind of banquet, an eternal banquet, “**the marriage supper of the Lamb**” (**Revelation 19:9**). One ticket offers temporary ease, the other eternal peace. Others suggest that the white stone is simply another reference to the manna, which looked like a white stone. Either way, it is Christ or the world. No one, especially not the church, can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

In the Semitic culture, the name of a person characterized the person. Saul’s name was changed to Paul, Simon to Peter, etc. For those who follow Christ, this new name designates a new person, a new identity, a new creature. It is a name known only to God and the one receiving it. Jesus here brings us some very personal and intimate. In a room, someone may shout out the name John, Bill, Kathy or Debbie and many people might turn and look. But this name belongs to you, and only you will turn and look when it is called out by God.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me (John 10:27).

He who has an ear, let him hear.

Questions for Study

1. What are things to consider when choosing to attend or leave a church (pages 2, 3)?
2. Can you think of similarities between Pergamos and your current culture (pages, 3, 4)?
3. How do you understand the “sword of the Spirit?” How should this influence us (page 4)?
4. Jesus speaks of “Satan’s throne” and “where Satan dwells.” How should we understand these ideas? Can you think of how this exists today (pages 5, 6)?
5. Explain the “doctrine of Balaam.” Can you think of ways this is influencing the church today (pages 6, 7)?
6. What does it mean to “repent?” Of what must people repent (page 7)?
7. Jesus says He will fight against the church with the sword of His mouth. What does this mean (page 7)?
8. What promises does Jesus give to those who overcome (pages 7, 8)?