

TEXT SERMONS

SERIES: REVELATION CHAPTERS 1-3

MESSAGE #6

PERGAMOS

‘THE CHURCH IN SATAN’S CITY’

REV. 2:12-17

One day the mailman delivered a letter to the Pastor of the church in the city of Pergamos. This was no normal letter. It was a Special Delivery letter. It was a letter the likes of which he had never before received. It was from the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. I can only imagine the trepidation with which he held it. With trembling hands he opened it. Things had not been going well in the church and when he read the first few lines his anxiety dramatically increased as he read, “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword....”

The Lord’s seven letters to the seven churches located in Asia Minor, recorded in Revelation chapters two and three, are addressed to the “Angel”, that is, the Messenger or Pastor of the church. The letters are not personal letters to the Pastors but are letters for the entire church, Pastors included.

The letters were penned by the Apostle John who was imprisoned on an island called Patmos, because of his faithful witnessing for Jesus Christ in the hostile environment of the Roman Empire. The letter to the church in Pergamos, like the other six, was dictated by the Lord Jesus. The correspondence from Christ to the Pergamum church was both a corrective and a comfort for the believers who were under great duress. Let us give careful attention to what the Lord of the Lampstands has to say.

We will follow the same pattern used in the previous two letters by viewing: The Place of the church; The Posture of Christ; The Praise for the Church; The Problems in the Church; The Prescription for the Church and The Promise to the Church.

I. THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH.

“To the angel of the church in Pergamos...” (2:12) To know something of the city in which each church was located helps us to understand the situations the various churches faced and encourages us today to be “blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil.2:15) among whom we are to shine as lights.

A. Pergamos Was A Capital City.

The Romans made the city of Pergamos the capital of Asia Minor and at the time John penned this letter, it had been such for 300 years. It was the largest city in Asia Minor. A capital city such as London, Paris, or Washington has a unique atmosphere.

B. Pergamos Was A Great Literary City.

Pergamos had a number of claims to fame, one of which was that they had invented a method of producing extremely thin layers of animal skins which made perfect writing

material. They called it “pergement.” Over time it came to be known as “parchment.” Probably because of the invention of parchment in Pergamos, it was the sight of the greatest library of the ancient world containing over 200,000 volumes, a great number when you consider they were all hand written. Later, Anthony gave the library to Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and moved it to Alexandra.

C. Pergamos Was A Great Religious City.

Pergamos was located on a hill the summit of which was 1,000 feet above the surrounding countryside. On the summit were many heathen temples. There were gods for every occasion. Dionysius, Athena, Aesculapius, Serapis, Demeter and many other lesser gods. Also here a great temple had been built for Emperor worship.

Pergamos was the center of the worship of a god named Asklepios, the god of healing. His full title was “Asklepios, the Savior.” The emblem used for Asklepios was a serpent. The coins in Pergamos had the emblem of a serpent on them. Serpents were put into the temple at night and persons with infirmities would pay to sleep in the temple because it was thought that if a serpent crawled over the patient during the night, the infirmity would be healed. The temple to Asklepios became a healing center connected to the worship of this snake god.

Also located in Pergamos was the temple of Zeus. It was the greatest temple there. It looked like a seat or throne. It was also an altar where animal sacrifices were burned 24 hours a day by a continuously changing team of priests. The sickening smell of burning flesh permeated the air in Pergamos and all day long a column of smoke curled upward as an offering to the gods. The smoke could be seen for miles around and served to keep the supremacy of Zeus in the public eye. It also served as a constant reminder to Christians that Satan was indeed at home in Pergamos.

This was Pergamos, a Satanic stronghold. But it was also a place where Jesus Christ had a stronghold! He had a church there, weak though it might have been. To this church He sent a letter. It opens with these words, “To the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ‘These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword ...’” (2:12)

II. THE POSTURE OF CHRIST.

As has been stated, the posture of Christ as He introduces Himself to each church, reveals His attitude toward the church. His introductory words to Pergamos were, “These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword.” His posture is powerful, dividing, penetrating and austere. It indicates that there is trouble in the church that needs to be cut away.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that “the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Heb.4:12)

III. THE PRAISE FOR THE CHURCH.

Rev. 2:13 “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.” He remarks about four areas of their circumstances:

A. I Know What You Are Doing.. “I know your works.” v.12

In the midst of gross wickedness they were working for Christ. The faithful were yet letting their light shine in a very dark environment. There are those today who take a pessimistic view of things and say, “Things are so bad. There is so much evil in the world, why fight it?” There were people of faith in the Pergamos church who kept on working against humanly insurmountable odds which should be an encouragement to all churches everywhere today to “fight the good fight of faith.”

B. I Know Where You Are. “I know where you dwell.” v.13

Right there in Pergamos, where the god of healing was worshipped under the Satanic emblem of snakes, objectionable as that was for the Christian believer, the church was to minister and grow.

Right there where the sacrifices to Zeus filled the air and persecution came from the hands of the people who were opposed to the church – right there Jesus commended some of the believers for refusing to deny His name. One of them, Antipas, had already been martyred for his faithfulness to Christ.

There are countries today where it is very dangerous to declare one’s faith in Christ and where Christians are persecuted and Christian churches are forbidden. We need to pray for our persecuted brethren and thank God for the freedom we have in our own country and spread the Good News while we can.

C. I Know Your Enemy.

In addition to the heathen temples, gods and religions all around them, and if that was not enough opposition, the church in Pergamos had the twin liabilities of Satan’s throne and Satan’s headquarters being in their city.

1. *Satan’s Throne.* v.12 – “where Satan’s throne is.”

Many scholars believe that this statement refers to the great altar of Zeus on the hill overlooking the city. It was a great chair or throne, forty feet high and it is believed by many to be “Satan’s throne” to which Jesus made reference.

2. *Satan’s Headquarters.* v.12 – “where Satan dwells.” The Greek is “where Satan lives” – not “visits! Contemplate this statement carefully: Jesus said that at that time Satan lived in Pergamos. A brief statement about the doctrine of Satan will help us understand Jesus’ statement.

- a. Satan is a created but fallen being, superhuman, personal and an evil world-power, presented in Scripture as the adversary both of God and men. He is not all-powerful, all-wise and he is not personally present everywhere at all times as God is. His evil influence and work is carried out by demons who are scattered universally. His personal presence is wherever spiritual darkness and evil are at their worst, after all, he is called “the Prince of darkness.”

- b. Pergamos was headquarters of Satan at the time Jesus sent the letter to the church in that city. Dr. Lehman Strauss wrote, "In a special sense Satan's headquarters were in Pergamos. Pergamos was in that day Satan's capital." (Strauss, "Prophetic Mysteries Revealed.")

What an appropriate place for one of the Lord's Lampstands! The darker the night, the brighter the light shines. At the time there was no darker place on earth than Pergamos and the church there was Christ's salt and light. We too, have our own enemies, "among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil.2:15)

D. I Know Of Your Faithfulness. v.12

"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."

There were representatives of Jesus Christ in this wicked place and they upheld His name, did not deny the faith even when one of their number was martyred, and even though Satan's headquarters was located there. The Christian life is not about comfort in this world but it is about conquest. We may feel that it would be much easier to be in some other place or under some other set of circumstances when the going gets rough. But Paul wrote, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." (Rom.8:35-37)

If the Christians in Pergamos could hold fast to His name and not deny His faith, we certainly should be able to do so today in our environment. You will recall that the church in Smyrna was located where there was a synagogue of Satan. The church in Pergamos was located where Satan had temporarily set up his headquarters. And yet these two churches were going on for God. Therefore, let us not give up to the world, give in to the flesh or give over to the devil but keep going for Christ until He comes for us!

IV. THE PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH. Rev.2:14-15

"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. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate."

The Message renders v.14 as follows: "why do you indulge that Balaam crowd? Don't you remember that Balaam was an enemy agent, seducing Balak and sabotaging Israel's holy pilgrimage by throwing unholy parties? And why do you put up with the Nicolaitans, who do the same thing?"

The Efficiency Expert examined the Pergamos church and said while there was much in their favor that He had a few things against them, namely, they had allowed libertarians to infiltrate the church. This was in two forms:

A. The Teaching of Balaam. v.14

“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.”

The story of Balaam, the false prophet who caused problems for Israel, is recorded in Numbers chapters 22-24. The King of Moab hired Balaam to curse Israel, but when that did not work out as they desired, Balaam told the wicked King, in essence, “If we can’t put a curse on them then corrupt them and God will judge them. So the Moabites sent their women over to intermarry with the Israeli men and taught them to eat food offered to idols. This was strictly forbidden by God.

The “doctrine of Balaam” referred to in the church in Pergamos was the teaching by some in the church that it was alright to commit sexual immorality, probably by consorting with the temple prostitutes. Balaam’s teaching was: “If you can’t curse them, then corrupt them by encouraging them to disqualify themselves by using liberty as license to sin.

B. The Teaching of The Nicolaitans. v.15

“You also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.”

In verse 6, when writing to the church at Ephesus, Jesus condemns the “deeds of the Nicolaitans” and here in Pergamos, he condemns the “doctrine of the Nicolaitans.” The word “Nicolaitans” comes from two Greek words, “nikos” meaning “victory” and “laos” meaning “people.”

The sect of the Nicolaitans abused the truth of Christian liberty by appealing to the grace of God to justify their loose lifestyles. They changed Paul’s statement in Romans 5:20, “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more” to mean: “The more you sin the more grace that you receive.” Or, in present day terminology: “Don’t worry about doing wrong; God’s grace will surely cover your sin.” The dictionary definition of “libertarian” is: “An advocate of full, unrestrained freedom of thought and action.” The dictionary definition of “libertine” is: “One who is sexually unrestrained, promiscuous, licentious.”

The teaching of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans was a very convenient and accommodating teaching in Pergamos. Both groups were totally immersed in the culture of Pergamos and sought to justify their indulgences on the grounds that God’s grace allowed them this latitude. Just because they could exercise such liberty was no reason that they should! Neither is it an excuse for Christians in our day, or any day for that matter, to run to the excesses of the worldlings!

Christianity brought a new standard of living, new morals, values and priorities to the corrupt culture of Pergamos. It was in opposition to loose living, immorality, indecency and idolatry. And so is genuine Christian teaching and living in our culture today. We are to confront culture, not conform to it! Paul’s teaching to the church in Rome is certainly right on the mark for us today: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the

mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:1-2)

V. THE PRESCRIPTION FOR THE CHURCH. v..16

“Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” They are given two options: swift repentance or severe reprimand.

A. Repentance.

The only remedy for sin, compromise, worldliness, error and unfaithfulness is to repent. The call today is for tolerance. The Bible says, “You that love the LORD, hate evil.” (Psalm 97:10) and “The fear of the Lord is to depart from evil.” (Psalm 34:14)

B. Reprimand. “else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” Notice that the Lord said “I will come to *you* and will fight against *them*.” He is saying, “If you do not deal with the offending persons, I will.” The church in Pergamos had to make a choice between two thrones: the throne of God or the throne of Satan. The Balaamites and the Nicolaitans were trying to serve both thrones.

There are Balaamites and Nicolaitans in churches today. They stand up for God on Sunday and then strike up a deal with the devil on Monday. Someone wrote, “They’re praising God on Sunday, they’ll be alright on Monday, it’s just a habit they’ve acquired!” God’s message for such is: “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ There-

fore ‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters says the LORD Almighty.’” (II Cor. 6:14-17)

VI. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH. v.17

“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.” He promises: hidden manna, a white stone and a new name. What do these terms mean?

A. “Hidden Manna.”

This appears to be in contrast to food offered to idols so prevalent a practice in Pergamos. Manna was food fed to the Israelites in the wilderness and came from heaven. Jesus said during His earthly ministry, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” (John 4:32) God has many surprises that await us in heaven that to us

are now hidden and which will be better than anything earth has to offer.

B. “White Stone.”

A special white stone was used as a ticket to get into a Royal Banquet or some special social event in Pergamos. Jesus could have been saying to them in essence: “I will give a ticket to the banquet in the Father’s House!” A white stone also was used in the law courts. An urn was passed around and the jury cast either a black stone or a white stone in it as their vote. A black stone represented a guilty verdict; a white stone a not guilty verdict. Jesus could have been saying, “Although you are condemned by your Christless culture, you who are true to Me are innocent!”

C. “A New Name.”

It was a popular practice for people to write the name of their God on a white stone, put a chain on it and wear it around their necks as a charm. Jesus is saying here that He would give a new name and no man would know what it was except the one who received it.

Whatever the interpretation of these terms and our understanding of them today, the faithful pilgrims in Pergamos were uplifted and encouraged by such references which they understood Jesus to be conveying. They were words that to them meant that Jesus cared and that the future was as bright as the promises of their Savior.

SUMMATION

This church, although not perfect and small in comparison to the huge and well attended heathen temples in Pergamos, was a lighthouse in a very dark place. We shall meet in heaven those whom Jesus said, “did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you.”

CONCLUSION

It takes courage for a citizen of heaven to live by faith in the foreign territory of this world dominated by the god of this world, Satan. (II Cor.4:4) Cowards do not last long on spiritual pilgrimages. They, like Demas, of whom Paul said, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world” (II Tim.4:10), are fair weather Christians. It takes courage to remain true to Bible-based convictions when everyone at the work-place, school or in the neighborhood says, “Come on, everybody is doing it!”

The church in Pergamos, as every church, had three battlefronts: the world, the flesh and the devil. They had to overcome their foes or be overcome by them. It takes courage to be an over-comer. We are either over-comers or we are short-comers. If we are coming up short of God’s expectations for us, as a church or as an individual, He has provided the means of victory: **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** (I John 1:9)

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