

Lesson 4: Message To The Churches – Smyrna/Pergamum

Key Text: Revelation 2:8-17

Lesson Objectives

In this lesson we will:

- a) Discover the importance of the 7 churches in Revelation
- b) Discover the message Jesus sent to the church in Smyrna
- c) Discover the message of Jesus sent to the church in Pergamum

THE SEVEN CHURCHES



The seven churches were located on a major Roman road. A letter carrier would leave the island of Patmos (where John was exiled), arriving first at Ephesus. He would travel north to Smyrna and Pergamum, turn southeast to Thyatira, and continue on to Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—in the exact order in which the letters were dictated.

The order of the seven churches also reflects the position of lamps of a seven-branched lampstand. Each lamp on one side of the lampstand corresponds to its parallel on the opposite side. It seems that the seven messages function exactly in such a way.

The first and last messages, to Ephesus and Laodicea, are clearly parallel; both churches are in great danger of lovelessness and legalism. The second and sixth, to Smyrna and Philadelphia, commend the churches for faithfulness; they do not receive a rebuke, and both are opposed by those “who call themselves Jews” (2:9; 3:9). The third and fifth messages, to Pergamum and Sardis, are parallel in apostasy; there is little good to be said about them.

The fourth message, to the middle church of the series, Thyatira, is clearly different. It is a divided church; and this message is the longest of all. In parallel structures such as this one, an understanding of one side of the parallel helps us to understand the other side.



Jesus met the situation and needs of each individual church to whom the messages of the book of Revelation are addressed. Revelation 1:12–18 lists various characteristics of Jesus Christ. It is particularly interesting to note that all of these characteristics are mentioned again in the messages to the seven churches. Each message begins with a brief description of Christ from the composite picture:

- To the angel of the church in Ephesus: *Thus says the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven lampstands* (2:1; cf. 1:13, 16).
- To the angel of the church in Smyrna: *Thus says the first and the last, who was dead and has come to life* (2:8; cf. 1:17–18).
- To the angel of the church in Pergamum: *Thus says the One who has the sharp two-edged sword* (2:12; cf. 1:16).

- To the angel of the church in Thyatira: *Thus says the Son of God who has eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like burnished bronze* (2:18; cf. 1:14–15).
- To the angel of the church in Sardis: *Thus says the One who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars*(3:1; cf. 1:4, 16).
- To the angel of the church in Philadelphia: *Thus says the holy One, the true One, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens*(3:7; cf. 1:18; the holy and true is found in 6:10).
- To the angel of the church in Laodicea: *Thus says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation*(3:14; cf. 1:5a).

Almost all of the various characteristics of the resurrected Christ mentioned in Revelation 1 are used to introduce the messages to the seven churches. The seven descriptions of Christ portray different aspects of his ministry to the churches. The particular aspect of Christ used in each message relates to the specific situation and need of each church. In the same way, the four gospels give different portraits of Jesus. Each gospel presents a unique picture of Jesus meeting the problems and needs of the people to whom it was sent.

To each individual church Jesus presents himself in a unique way. No church gets the whole Jesus, and no two of them share the same aspect of Jesus. The key to the section. As the various churches are weighed and discussed one can see the living Christ in action among His own people. He does not appear to them as the terrible sovereign on the throne nor as the conqueror riding to battle. He walks among them as a Lord who seeks to commend their virtues even more than to expose and punish their faults. These letters are His particular warning and counsel to the church of all time as its various aspects appear under the guise of their seven historic places. The glorified Lord still walks in the midst of his church. He speaks to his end-time church today through the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He presents himself to his people in various ways, addressing problems in their different life situations and needs. He meets them where they are now, as he met the Christians of those seven congregations in the province of Asia in John's day.

(Detailed appendix of the message to Pergamum given below. See Lesson 2 for message to Smyrna).

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM {PERGAMOS} - HISTORY

Pergamum was celebrated as the center of intellectual life in the whole Hellenistic world. Its famous library of nearly 200,000 volumes was second only to the library of Alexandria. Pergamum was also a great and important religious center; it was famed for its magnificent temples erected to Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asclepius. On the hill above the city stood the great altar of Zeus, the central portion of which is exhibited in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin.

“Forty feet high, and it stood on a projecting ledge of rock. It looked exactly like a great seat or throne on the hillside; and all day every day it smoked with the smoke of sacrifices offered to Zeus.” Near the city stood the immense shrine of Asclepius, the serpent-god of healing. In John’s time, the shrine experienced great popularity; people came from all over the world to be healed by the god Asclepius. Pergamum was really the “Lourdes of the Province of Asia.”

Both Zeus and Asclepius were called “the Savior” and were represented by a serpent (an emblem retained by the modern medical profession).



Pergamum was the first city in Asia to support the imperial cult and have a temple dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor. This may explain the city's

description as the place “where Satan’s throne is.”

1. Description of Jesus (v. 12)



This letter has the simplest description of Christ of any of the seven, containing just one element. The “sharp double-edged sword” was a symbol of Roman justice. As mentioned in 1:16, this symbol is drawn from Isa. 11:4 and the picture of divine justice there. It is linked with Rev. 2:16 here and thus not only to 1:16 but also to 19:15, 21, with the imagery of the sword of justice “coming out of Christ’s mouth,” referring to his word of judgment. The sword was a Thracian broadsword used in cavalry charges; in Roman times it became a symbol of their might. Here it is probably used because the Roman proconsul in charge of the province resided in Pergamum, and the symbol of his total sovereignty over every area of life, especially to execute enemies of the state, was the sword. This tells the church that it is the exalted Christ, not Roman officials, who is the true judge. The ultimate power belongs to God, and nothing the pagans can do will change that.

The Roman governor, with headquarters in Pergamum, had the right of the sword; that is to say, he claimed to have the power of life and death. At his command, a person could be put to death on the spot, and he could use it at any given moment against any Christian. But the very outset of the message to the church urges the Christians not to forget that the last word is still with the risen Christ, who has the sharp, two-edged sword. According to the epistle to the Hebrews, the word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword (4:12). The persecutors of God’s people might be “satanically powerful,” yet the power of the resurrected Christ is greater. “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). He is indeed in control.

2. Appraisal/Evaluation (2:13-15)

The exalted Christ “knows” (on this see 2:2, 9) three things: the pagan world in which they live, their faithful witness, and their endurance under persecution. The Greek verb for “you dwell” depicts a residence or habitation. They were not merely temporary visitors but had their home there. The emphasis is on the place where Satan has his throne.

Jesus recognizes Pergamum as a very dangerous place. The Christians in Pergamum lived in a religious and moral climate hostile to their faith. The Greek text indicates that they resided there permanently. On one hand, they were surrounded by paganism and its magnificent and splendid temples; on the other, they were exposed to a pagan religious lifestyle and immoral practices. No wonder the lifestyle of the pagan religion was, in its own way, very appealing to some Christians in Pergamum. Above all, the emperor worship created a difficult environment for this church.

At any time, the authorities could summon the Christians and order them to worship the emperor and denounce Christ on threat of persecution and death; those who complied were issued a certificate. This made the city the place *where Satan dwells* and where his rule was the strongest. The repeated references in verse 13 to the city as the ruling and dwelling place of Satan indicates how dangerous Pergamum could be for Christians living there.

Despite the circumstances, the Christians in Pergamum remained faithful. *And you are holding fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you.* In spite of the fact that Pergamum was a very dangerous place for Christian faith and existence, and that they had many reasons to escape and live elsewhere, the Christians decided to stay firm and live and bear witness for Christ where life had set them, namely, where Satan’s rule was the strongest. They stayed and remained loyal, even in the face of the persecution and death as experienced by Antipas, who was probably one of the faithful in the church in Pergamum.

Christ's "knowledge" centered on the faithfulness of the Pergamum believers. They continued to "hold fast" or remain faithful to Him. The verb means to "grasp forcibly" or, in this figurative use, to "remain firm." In 2:1 Jesus "holds the seven stars firm" as he watches over the churches, and here the believers "hold firm" to his name. The "name" (38 times in this book; only Acts uses it more frequently) connotes the essence of the person and often speaks of the person's basic characteristic. For instance, Jesus (see Matt. 1:21, 25 on the name Jesus) gave Simon the name "Cephas/Peter" to designate what he would become, the "little rock." When the believers are given "new names" in 2:17 below, they have a new identity, a new family (cf. 3:5, 12; 14:1; 22:4). Therefore, to remain true to Jesus' name means to live up to the responsibility of this new identity, to resist the lure of this pagan world.

It is especially significant that Jesus calls Antipas "my faithful witness." This is Jesus' own title in the book (Rev. 1:5; 3:14). In the early church, the Greek word *martus* meant both "witness" and "martyr." That is to say, to be a witness for the truth often meant to be a martyr. Jesus is the faithful witness/martyr, and all who bear witness for him have often to suffer with and for him.

Even today, one who bears witness for Christ is often a martyr for Christ, not so much in the sense of having to give up his or her life for Christ, but in the sense of having to suffer for Christian principles. But one thing must be remembered: to those who are faithful as Antipas was, Jesus Christ gives "nothing less than his own title." To suffer for Christ is to go through what Christ has already gone through and, in the end, to share the glory with him.

The second part of Jesus' appraisal of this church, however, is not pleasant at all. The Pergamum residents are evidently a divided church. Some of them, like Antipas, held fast Christ's name and did not deny their faith;

namely, they were opposed to any compromise with the world's conduct and lifestyle. Others in Pergamum held to the teachings of *Balaam* and *the Nicolaitans*.

While the Ephesians perceived the destructive effects of the deceptive teachings of the Nicolaitans, the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira tolerated these false teachers and the compromises made to their religion. The fact that the Balaamites and Nicolaitans are mentioned together suggests that they are somehow related. We met them earlier in Ephesus and will meet them again in the message to the church in Thyatira. These false teachers advocated compromise and sought to persuade their fellow Christians that there was nothing wrong with a "prudent conformity to the world's standards" in order to escape persecution (read 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11).

Christians are called to be holy, that is, separated and different from the world: "Come out from their midst and be separate" (2 Cor. 6:17). This separation, however, means neither a separation and isolation from the rest of the people in the world nor a hatred for them. Jesus prayed that his disciples not be taken from the world but be kept from "the evil one" (John 17:15-16).

In order to save the world, followers of Christ will seek to be "all things to all men" (following Paul's example) so that they might save some (1 Cor. 9:22). Christians "compromise," so to speak, so that people may be saved and brought up to the level of Christian faith and life rather than bringing Christianity down to the level of the world. The problem with the Nicolaitans was that they followed a "policy of compromise" in their loyalty to Christ in order to avoid discomfort and trouble in the world.

While the Ephesian church was commended for identifying and opposing the Nicolaitan heresy, the church at Pergamum tolerated it and so had to be castigated for their weakness. The introductory formula is much the

same as that addressed to Ephesus (2:4) except for the addition of “a few things”. The purpose here is to heighten the seriousness of the situation. While the Christians were remaining faithful, they were allowing a heretical movement to flourish in their midst, thereby endangering the whole church. Their problem was not external but internal, as seen by use of the term “you have in your midst.”

The problem is identified as “the teaching of Balaam”. Some members of the congregation had apparently fallen into the Nicolaitan cult movement, here described in OT terms as “the teachings of Balaam”.

Balaam was a Gentile prophet consulted by Balak king of Moab in Num. 22–24 to place a curse on the Israelites, but instead Balaam uttered only blessings. There is no record of Balaam advising Balak, but in Num. 25:1–3 the Israelites are described as succumbing to immorality with the pagan women and idolatry in worshiping Baal, and in Num. 31:16 Moses attributed the action of the Moabite women to “Balaam’s advice.” Moreover, Jewish tradition considered Balaam a false teacher.

Christ emphasizes this by stating that Balaam “taught” them how to lead Israel into sin. The language used here means “throw a stumbling block” and speaks of leading a person into apostasy. In Matt. 18:7 the “stumbling block” was temptation to fall away from Christ, and in both Rom. 9:33 and 1 Cor. 1:23 it refers to the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. The cult of Balaam is clearly portrayed as a heresy and its followers as apostates.

The two areas of this “teaching”—idolatry and immorality—relate to practice rather than doctrine, and it is interesting that no mention is made in the letters to Ephesus, Pergamum, or Thyatira of the actual teachings of this movement. Perhaps this is deliberate, because the teachings were not worthy of discussion. The movement centered on practice more than theory. The description—“eating meat sacrificed to idols” and “commit idolatry”—is reminiscent of Acts 15:20, 29, and the four restrictions placed on Gentile believers by the Jerusalem council.

These were always problems among Gentile Christians, raised in an atmosphere of idolatry and immorality. Apparently this cult movement sought accommodation with such pagan practices. The primary aspect was idolatry. The heretics were apparently teaching that there was nothing wrong with participating in the imperial cult, since even most Romans did it out of civic duty rather than actual worship.

The followers of the false teachers have “grabbed hold of the teaching of Balaam” in verse 14 and have “grabbed hold of the teaching of the Nicolaitans” in verse 15. It is likely that they are one and the same set of “teachings.”

3. Counsel/Command (v. 16)

Jesus' counsel to the entire church in Pergamum is similar to that given to the Ephesians (cf. 2:5): ***Repent, therefore.*** If those advocating compromise do not repent, dreadful consequences will result. Christ says that he will come to them ***quickly and will make war against them with the sword of his mouth.*** This instrument evokes God's threat to Balaam of punishment with the sword (Num. 22:23, 31–32). In the war waged against the Midianites, Balaam was slain with the sword (Num. 31:8), along with those he induced to sin (Num. 25:5). Similar judgment is directed against the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans in Pergamum.

According to the author of Hebrews, the word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword and judges “the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Paul also speaks of “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). The sword, then, is the word of Christ. The Greek present tense indicates a real threat; Christ is already on his way to wage a war and perform judgment with “the sword of his mouth” (cf. Rev. 19:13–15). The only way to escape the impending judgment is to make a decisive turnaround and repent.

Their situation was directly opposite that of the Ephesian church, who had triumphed over the Nicolaitans but had forgotten how to “love”; they were faithful but had forgotten how to fight against the enemies of God. Nevertheless, the solution was the same: repent. As discussed in 2:5, the verb means to “change” previous ways, both spiritually and ethically. In this context it means to change their approach and take a strong stance against the false teachers. To fail to do so would constitute sin (“repent” always connotes sin) and invite divine judgment.

The text now switches from the present tense “come” to the future tense “will fight” in order to make explicit the nature of the coming judgment. The verb carries a strong meaning, “to wage war,” and is used five times (the noun occurs nine times) in Revelation both of the dragon’s (and beast’s) “war” against the saints (11:7; 12:17; 13:7) and the Lamb (16:14; 17:14; 19:19) and God’s war against the forces of evil (12:7; 19:11).

This is a particularly apocalyptic metaphor, building on the divine warrior theme from the OT as God goes to war against his enemies. By switching from the second-person pronoun “you” to the third-person pronoun “them”, John stresses that the “coming” will be to the whole church, but the wrath will be especially addressed to the heretics and their followers. Nevertheless, the judgment will be upon the whole church, for undoubtedly if the church had taken a strong stand, there would have been far fewer defections to the Nicolaitan camp.

The believers are being given a choice: go to war against the heretics or else God will do so for them but with far more drastic results.

5. Call/Promise (v. 17)

Those who repent are given a threefold promise: they will be given the hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name written on the stone. The false teachers in Pergamum advocated compromise in eating the pagan food sacrificed to idols in order to get a certificate and avoid discomfort. The day is coming when those who remain faithful and refuse to participate in pagan feasts will participate in a feast of heavenly food—*the hidden manna*—“bread of the angels” (Ps. 78:25), reserved only for the overcomers who reject compromise and hold fast Christ’s name.

Instead of the Roman certificate, they will receive *a white stone* with a *new name* inscribed on it as the award for remaining faithful and loyal to Christ. A new name in the Bible stands for a person’s new relationship with God (cf. Gen. 17:5; 32:27–28; Isa. 62:2; 65:15; Rev. 14:1). In the context of persecution and false accusations of the church in Pergamum, the “new name” signifies a restoration of dignity of a “good name.” A white stone with a new name inscribed on it entitles the overcomer to the special privilege of participating in “the wedding supper of the Lamb” in the heavenly city at the Second Coming. “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9).

Call to hear the Spirit. The situation of the Christians in Pergamum clearly shows that it is perfectly possible to be a follower of Christ under horrendous circumstances. Christians are invited to live lives of a “faithful witness” where life has set them. If they are in “Pergamum” where Satan’s influences and power are the strongest, then there they must live and demonstrate that they are the followers of Christ who himself was “the faithful witness.”

Historical application. In applying the message to the church in Pergamum to Christian history, the situation of this church seems to aptly fit into the period after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in a.d. 313. The church finally won its struggle with paganism, and Christianity became the state religion. The Christians did not have to fear persecution or outside pressure anymore. Tradition was gradually replacing the Bible as the source of teaching and belief. Although many Christians remained unwavering and faithful to the gospel during this period, the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era were characterized by spiritual decline and apostasy, during which the church wrestled with the temptation of compromise.