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Jesus' Letters to Seven Asian Churches - Revelation 2:1-3:22
Part 3 of 7: Pergamum - Revelation 2:12-17

By Tal Davis

Following His letters to the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna, the risen Lord Jesus Christ next addresses the congregation in Pergamum. Speaking through His inspired scribe, the elder Apostle John, Jesus delivers to the church's angel, or pastor, the words He wants the believers to hear. As with the other six churches, he commends and/or admonishes them to be conquerors for His sake in that place where resides "Satan's Throne" and to hold fast to the truth. In this third installment of seven, we analyze Jesus' letter to the church in Pergamum.

To read parts one and two go here:
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-1-ephesus-tal-davis/>
<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-2-smyrna-tal-davis/>

The city of Pergamum was sixty-five miles north of Smyrna and fifteen miles inland from the western shore of the Anatolian Peninsula (now eastern Turkey). Its name is derived from the Greek words "Made from Animals." As capital of the Roman province of Asia, the city was beautiful and wealthy, rivaling both Ephesus and Smyrna. Pergamum was especially famous for two institutions. One was a great library that contained more than 200 thousand parchment scrolls, second only to the library in Alexandria, Egypt. Parchment, treated animal skins used to write on, was manufactured in the city. The city also contained numerous temples honoring pagan gods and the emperors of Rome. Its most prominent feature was a great altar overlooking

the city dedicated to Zeus, king of the Greek pantheon gods.

12 "Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum: Thus says the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword: 13 I know where you live – where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives. 14 But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. 15 In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is inscribed that no one knows except the one who receives it.

As with the previous letters, the exalted speaker, the risen Christ, begins by identifying Himself. In this case, in verse 12, as "the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword." This phrase is a flashback confirmation of His identity. John had described Him earlier in Rev. 1:16, saying, "a sharp double-edged sword came from His mouth." The double-edged sword coming from His mouth is a metaphor for the Word of God. The sword is also used in Revelation as an instrument of judgment to defeat the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans who were misleading some in the church (Rev. 2:14, 15;

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see also Rev. 19:15, 21). It had special impact in Pergamum which Rome had granted the right of capital punishment, as symbolized by the sword.

The Lord is fully aware of their predicament as shown in verse 13.. They live "where Satan's throne is." This ominous statement had several implications for the Pergamum believers, all of them bad. It probably pointed to the great altar to Zeus that stood on the city's elevated acropolis. Many Greek and Roman cities had such elevated citadels for defense, and to erect temples to gods and emperors. Travelers from Smyrna to Pergamum, from a distance, would have thought the altar of Zeus looked like a giant throne.

For Christians and Jews, the gleaming altar to the Greek king of the gods was reviled as a throne built to worship Satan himself. Likewise would be their aversion to the other temples and idols. Particularly distressing were the temples honoring Roman emperors. An elaborate one was built there in AD 29 for Caesar Augustus. The godly believers may have felt like Paul when he visited Athens and was made ill by the presence of thousands of pagan shrines in the city (Acts 17:16). Whatever the Lord had specifically in mind, all of those spiritual canards were indicative of satanic influence in Pergamum.

Have you ever traveled to an exotic location for a vacation? Many Christians tour pagan temples while visiting places where worship of false gods is still prevalent. They often testify to feelings of uneasiness in their spirits as they view the idols and altars. They are especially troubled watching people bow and make offerings to them. Paul indicates that making offerings or sacrifices to idols is tantamount to worshipping demons (1 Cor. 10:20).

Alarmingly, Americans no longer have to leave this country to see those scenarios playing out. Pagan temples and cultic worship centers are being built in many U.S. cities, sometimes right next door to Christian churches.

So, the Lord is cognizant of their awful dilemma. However, in the midst of the crisis, as He does with most of the Asian churches, He gives them a great commendation. They are "holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me." They refused to participate in the pagan ceremonies, or call Caesar Lord, provoking hostility from the townspeople in Pergamum. The Christians were determined to worship only the One True God and Savior Jesus Christ, whatever the cost. Their loyalty was to His name only, that is to the Divine person He truly is, and to no Roman emperor or mythological god.

This was true even in the wake of the murder of Antipas some time earlier. The Lord says he was "My faithful witness who was put to death among you." The Greek word translated witness is *martyr*, from which is derived the word "martyr." A martyr is one who dies for his faith, as in Antipas' case. Very little is known about that courageous follower of Jesus. Some traditions hold that he was burned alive at the order of emperor Domitian. Ironically, Domitian himself was assassinated in AD 96 by his own courtesans in Rome. In any case, Antipas will forever be enshrined on earth and in heaven as indicated by Jesus Himself in this passage.

The Lord then repeats His denunciation of Pergamum as being "where Satan lives." The suffering they received for His sake had its origin in the evil one who seeks to destroy their testimony through earthly persecution. The Romans and the pagans were puppets on the strings of the devil.

Some progressive theologians have tried to deny the actual existence of

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Satan as nothing more than a mythic personification of evil. Yet, from the words and actions of Jesus in the gospels and in these passages, He certainly knew and affirmed the reality of Satan and his minions, the demons.

Having applauded the Christians in Pergamum, in verse 14 the Lord now takes a turn to the negative, just as He does with most of the other Asian churches. Surely they did well upholding Jesus' name and never denying Him. But, He now announces, "I have a few things against you." By saying they are "few," He probably means they are small in number, but the problems themselves are not insignificant.

The Lord chastises the Pergamum church for allowing two heresies to infiltrate their fellowship. He warns them, "You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block." These are references to a group in the church that was teaching heresy. The names refer to two characters in the book of Numbers. Balaam was a non-Israelite from Pethor who claimed to be a prophet. He was believed to have a gift of giving blessings or curses. Balak was the king of Moab who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites to avoid having to fight them. (Num. 22-25; 31:16)

First he says there are in their fellowship some "who hold to the teaching of Balaam." The story of Balaam in Numbers is quite remarkable. Balak, king of the Moabites, offered him a hefty reward to put a curse on the Israelites who he thought were threatening his kingdom as they moved toward the Promised Land. Balaam, however, sought God's favor to do so before uttering the curse. God, of course, said no. The Israelites were His chosen and blessed people!

So Balaam headed to Moab to discuss the situation with Balak. On the

way, the Angel of the LORD stood on the road holding a sword which blocked Balaam's donkey from getting through. When the poor donkey could go no further, Balaam beat him with a stick. That's when things really got interesting. Numbers records, "Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth" and she spoke to Balaam. As Balaam and his donkey were arguing, the angel appeared and warned him not to say anything other than what God told him (Num. 22:21-30). From that point Balaam spoke only God's messages to Balak. In four oracles, he declared how God would bless Israel. He even spoke a prophecy of the coming of Christ (Num. 24:17).

Thus, Balaam did not curse the Israelites. However, he did instruct the Moabites to use their women to entice Israelite men to engage in Baal worship with its sexual rituals at Baal-Peor. This brought God's judgment on Israel and the Moabites (Deut. 23:3-6). Twenty four thousand Israelites died in a plague as punishment for their idolatry (Num. 25:9; see also 2 Pet. 2:15-16). As for Balaam, he was eventually killed by the Israelites in a battle against the Midianites (Num. 31:8). This was the Israelites' stumbling block, or trap, to which the Lord alludes in this verse.

The Lord then identifies the Pergamum church's second major problem, which is two-fold. They were apparently eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols and also participating in immoral sexual activities. These were in direct violation of the guidelines laid down by the Jerusalem church council described by Luke in Acts 15. The council debated whether or not Gentiles were required to convert to Judaism before they could become Christians. Specifically, the issue focused on the rite of circumcision. The council members heard testimonies from Peter, Paul, and Barnabas concerning the great

things God was doing among the Gentiles, particularly in Antioch. In the end, James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, rendered the verdict (as directed by the Holy Spirit): Gentiles were not required to convert to Judaism in order to become Christians!

Nonetheless, several spiritual and moral parameters for behavior were spelled out in the council's positive letter sent to the Gentiles. First, they were not to eat anything strangled to death or to eat animal blood. Second, they were not to eat meat that was used in sacrifice to idols. It was a common practice among pagan priests to sell meat that had been sacrificed to their gods after the rituals were completed. And third, they were prohibited from engaging in fornication – that is, any sexually immoral behaviors. These would include premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality, or any other practice outside of the one man-one woman bond of biblical marriage. Often, such sexually depraved acts were integral aspects of pagan rites.

Apparently, the church in Pergamum was tolerating some of their members participating in these forbidden activities. Therefore, Jesus warned them to put a stop to it or suffer the consequences.

The Lord then, in verse 15, highlights the second major heretical influence in the Pergamum congregation. He says they have some in their midst who "hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans." This was the group whose false teachings were influencing some people in the Asian churches (see Part One, v. 2:6). Possibly they mixed Christianity with pagan idolatry and ritual prostitution. They may have been associated with the Balaam sect since their name derives from "Conqueror of the People," and Balaam means "Devourer of the people."

In His letter to the church in Ephesus the Lord had already declared His hatred for the practices and doctrines of that unorthodox sect (Rev. 2:6). The Ephesians had sternly rebuked their teachings, but Pergamum believers were still tolerating their falsehoods.

Every generation of Christians is challenged by those who seek to corrupt both the moral principles of Christianity and its essential doctrinal beliefs. In our current age, we have seen the gradual corrosion of moral standards and the tolerance of theological concepts well beyond biblical boundaries, even within the official teachings of many historically orthodox churches.

Yes, the Pergamum church, like most of the others in Asia, has some good qualities. They had remained loyal to the Lord's name and refused to deny their faith even in the face of persecution and death. That is all well and good, but they also have some serious problems. The "few things" He described were deadly serious. Nevertheless, as in the cases of the other churches, the risen Christ provides a solution in verse 16.

He commands them emphatically, "Therefore repent!" This was the same imperative demand He made to the Ephesians because they lost their first love (Rev. 2:5). Now the Pergamum believers must reject the septic doctrines and sick practices of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans which had infected their fellowship. This command suggests they need to rebuke their ideas and refrain from their decadent practices. The church leaders also must take immediate steps to sever the heretical practitioners from the fellowship, like a cancerous tumor. Such evil cannot be countenanced or it will destroy the body of Christ. Yet, even the heretics still had time to repent and submit to the Lord's correction.

The Lord makes it clear that if the church does not do something, He will. I will come to you quickly. The Lord's statement in this context is not a reference to His second coming, though that is the major theme of Revelation. Here the phrase applies to the church's existing crisis. He will come now, not later, to address these issues. And, when He comes, He will do battle with "the sword of my mouth." Christ had introduced Himself as the one with the sharp-two edged sword. Now we see how He intends to use the powerful weapon of speaking the Word of truth. The church's failure to act swiftly to cease compromising and rid themselves of false teachers would result in Christ's judgment on them. Perhaps their lampstand would be removed like Ephesus'. (Rev. 2:5).

Historically churches tend to drift away from the truth of the Scriptures and God's ethical standards. Unperceptively, churches will compromise little by little on doctrine and moral principles. Eventually, unless churches

vigilantly uphold biblical truth, before they even know it, they will tolerate, or even advocate, beliefs and practices clearly condemned in Scripture. In the 21st century, the naturalistic worldview and secular ethical mores have moved American society, and some ecclesiastical bodies, away from their historic biblical roots.

The Lord concludes His letter to Pergamum in verse 17 saying, "anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches." Again He asserts that comprehending divine truth requires enlightened spiritual perception from the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised His disciples He would send the "Counselor" (*Parakletos*), that is, The Holy Spirit, to teach them God's truth (John 14:16-18, 26: 15:26; 16:7-15). That same Spirit who instructed the Pergamum church will guide believers today if they tune in with their spiritual ears.

The Lord then adds a somewhat puzzling postscript. He again makes a promise to "the one who conquers." This is the victorious Christian He addresses near the end of all the seven letters. It is the believer who, when necessary, repents of his sin, seeks restoration, and remains in close relationship with Christ throughout tribulations, as in the Asian churches.

The Lord's promise is delineated by three symbols. First, He pledges to give them "hidden manna." Manna was the miraculous food God provided daily to the people of Israel while they sojourned in the wilderness. The Hebrew word "manna" literally means "What is it?" Moses commanded Aaron to store some of it in a jar so future Israelite generations would see how God provided for their ancestors' needs (Exodus 16:32-34). The manna jar was eventually placed in the Ark of the Covenant which rested in Solomon's Temple. According to the non-canonical book of 2 Maccabees in the Apocrypha, Jeremiah supposedly took the Ark from Jerusalem before it was attacked by Babylon in 586 BC. He hid it on a mountain where it is to remain until the coming of the Messiah (2 Maccabees 2:4-8). Whether or not that account is true, hidden manna, in this instance, is a metaphor for Christ's promise to provide for the material needs of the one who conquers.

Second, Jesus promises a "white stone." Its exact symbolic meaning is debated. Some interpreters see it as like invitations given to attend a banquet. Others surmise it was a jewel used in Jewish rituals. Roman courts used white stones to vote to acquit a defendant. Perhaps its color symbolized purity, holiness, and salvation through Christ. No one really knows. Probably the people in Pergamum understood it in light of some object in their city, or from its history. Whatever its basis, the white stone undoubtedly represented a wonderful blessing from Christ.

Third, "a new name will be inscribed" on the stone. The new name signifies the new holy character one receives by grace through faith in Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17)! No one knows the name "except the one who receives it," alluding to the intimate personal relationship a believer enjoys with God through Christ. These rewards are promised to those in Pergamum and believers of all generations who boldly witness for Christ and stand firm in the truth of the Gospel.

In the next installment, Part Four, we will continue our analyses of Jesus' letters to the seven churches of Asia. Next will be the church in Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29).

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