

WHERE SATAN DWELLS

Revelation 2:12-17

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But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14).

The seven messages from Jesus to the churches of Revelation seem to be organized in a chiastic pattern. Chi is the Greek letter for X, and chiasm is a literary device that follows this pattern, with the first and last items linked, the second and second-to-last items linked, and so forth. This pattern can be seen in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 in that the first and last letters, to Ephesus and Laodicea, address churches that have lost their first love and grown lukewarm (Rev. 2:4, 3:16). Likewise, the second and sixth letters seem to be linked, since both Smyrna and Philadelphia are churches for which Jesus had no criticism.

A chiastic pattern is useful not only in linking pairs but also in that chiasm focuses emphasis on the items in the center. This raises a question as to the relationship of the messages to the third, fourth, and fifth churches. The answer seems to be a progression that Jesus highlights as endangering not only these churches but all of his churches in all times. The third message, to Pergamum, warns against false teaching that turns Christ's people toward worldliness. The fourth message, to Thyatira, rebukes not just false teaching but also its fruit in sinful debauchery. The fifth message, to Sardis, shows the ultimate result when false teaching leads to sinful indulgence: Jesus writes to Sardis: "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1). This seems to be the overall warning given by the

exalted Christ to his church: if false teaching is permitted, the worldliness it fosters will lead to gross sinfulness, the result of which will be death. This warning not only pertained to the churches at the end of the first century, but speaks with the greatest of urgency to compromised churches at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

THE THREAT OF PERSECUTION

Christ's letter to Smyrna warned about approaching persecution (2:10), but in the letter to Pergamum, Jesus writes to Christians who have already witnessed martyrdom for the faith. Jesus praises them: "you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you" (Rev. 2:13). The word for "witness" is *martus*, a form of the word that gives us "martyr," a believer who gives his or her life in faithfulness to Christ.

It is not surprising that martyrdom had already come to Pergamum, since Jesus says it is "where Satan's throne is" and "where Satan dwells" (Rev. 2:13). There are a number of reasons suggested as to why Jesus says this about Pergamum. Like Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamum was a large and important city with a strong concentration of idolatry and false religion. Above the city streets was a high terrace filled with temples and government buildings. Four different cults had headquarters in Pergamum, including the gods Zeus, Athene, Dionysos, and especially Asklepios. The latter god was famed for healing, so that Pergamum attracted people from all over the world seeking restoration at the shrine of "Asklepios the Savior." Some have thought that this shrine is behind Jesus' reference to "Satan's throne," since Asklepios' symbol was a coiled serpent, as seen today in symbols dedicated to the medical profession.

Pergamum was also the headquarters of the Roman government in Asia. Michael Wilcock writes: "If Ephesus was the New York of Asia, Pergamum was its Washington, for there the Roman imperial power had its seat of government."¹ For this reason, Pergamum was also the city most devoted to the Roman imperial cult and the place where Christians were most likely to be persecuted for refusing to worship Caesar as God. As travelers approached Pergamum from the south, "the shape of the city-hill would appear as a giant throne

¹ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 47.

towering above the plain.”² The throne in Pergamum belonged to Caesar, who was Satan’s chief instrument in persecuting Christians. In contrast to Smyrna, where the persecution arose from Jewish betrayals, in Pergamum the Christians faced the hostility of pagans who demanded conformity to their idolatrous cultural norms. It is probably for resisting pagan practices and for refusing to worship Caesar that Antipas lost his life in service to Christ.

We know from a letter from the Roman governor Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan, dated around 111 AD, that accused Christians could only avoid death by cursing the name of Jesus Christ. It is probably with this in mind that Jesus praises the church in Pergamum: “Yet you hold fast my name” (Rev. 2:13). The Christians would not renounce Jesus or despise his name, even on pain of death. Moreover, Jesus said, “you did not deny my faith” (Rev. 2:13). This means that the Christians would not accept another Lord in Jesus’ place, and that they would not renounce central biblical doctrines such as the deity of Christ, the atoning sacrifice on his cross, and salvation through faith alone. Though this faithful stance threatened the Christians’ lives, Jesus reminds them that he wields the true sword of judgment and that he will overturn any verdict given by the Roman proconsul. Thus Jesus begins his message: “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword’” (Rev. 2:12).

Joseph Ton, a Baptist pastor persecuted by the Communist regime in Romania, wrote a book titled *A Theology of Martyrdom*. In it, he made a point about Jesus’ praise for Antipas as “my faithful witness.” Ton urges that just as the Lord makes Christians stewards of things like money, time, and talents, he also makes us stewards of our witness in the face of death. A Christian who suffers for Jesus is given a precious resource with which he or she may reach multitudes for the gospel.³ For making the most of their persecution, the saints in Pergamum earned Christ’s fervent praise.

² Robert H. Mounce, *Revelation (Revised)*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 96.

³ Cited in Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 50.

THE THREAT OF HERESY

Persecution is not the only serious threat facing Christians and churches, however. A second threat is false teaching from within, and for this reason Jesus expresses serious concern for Pergamum: “But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:14-15).

The strange figure Balaam is a famous biblical example of an enemy who first tried to persecute believers but found greater success by seducing them. When Israel was advancing through the wilderness near Moab, Balak the king of Moab sought to destroy them by having Balaam declare a curse. This attack failed because when Balaam began cursing Israel, the Holy Spirit would come upon him and change his curses into blessings (Num. 23:1-12). Like Satan in Pergamum, Balaam realized that persecution was only making God’s people stronger, so he changed tactics. Jesus’ message says that Balaam “put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel” (Rev. 2:14), so that they ate prohibited foods and entered into sexual sin. Balaam did this by sending the daughters of Moab into the Israelite camp to lure the men into sexual sin and idolatry. Numbers 25 records that God judged Israel for these sins, slaying 24,000 people by a plague.

In referring to the example of Balaam and also the false teachers known as the Nicolaitans, it is likely that Jesus was speaking of the same persons. “Nicolaitans” and “Balaam” have the same meaning, the first a Greek word and the second a Hebrew word meaning “conqueror of the people.” Jesus equates the two, saying, “So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Rev. 2:15).

In considering Jesus’ description of false teachers under the name of Balaam, we should note that Balaam wreaked his havoc by means of false teaching: he “taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel” (Rev. 2:14). In Pergamum, similar false teaching encouraged Christians to “eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.” It seems, therefore, that the Nicolaitans encouraged cultural accommodation and secular living. In a place where it seemed impossible that Christians could survive by refusing

to accept the imperial cult, they urged believers to say the words and participate in the ritual feasts. Perhaps they further added that since Jesus died to forgive sins, Christians should not worry about sinful patterns like sexual immorality that would enable us to get along in a pagan world. Robert Mounce suggests their message as teaching “that it was possible without disloyalty to maintain a peaceful co-existence with Rome.”⁴ William Barclay comments that the Nicolaitans “sought to persuade Christians that there was nothing wrong with a prudent conformity to the world’s standards.”⁵

Pergamum reminds us, in this way, of two great strategies employed by Satan against the Christian church. The first is persecution, which the believers of Pergamum had withstood. The second was false teaching leading to unholy and worldly living, and to this Pergamum was in danger of succumbing. Jesus thus warns his people: “Therefore repent” (Rev. 2:16).

Today, Nicolaitans would be foremost among those urging the ordination of homosexuals as ministers, since this compromise is demanded by the secular culture. Evangelicals smugly condemn liberals for this patently unbiblical practice. Yet by refusing to practice biblical gender order in the church, and by refusing to teach on unpopular topics like sin, divine wrath, and eternal judgment, they are propagating the very false approach to the Bible that has produced such radical results in other churches more advanced along the same trajectory of worldly accommodation and spiritual decline.

Jesus’ warning to Pergamum teaches us that Christians and churches must be vigilant against false teaching. This was Paul’s counsel when he charged the elders of Ephesus to watch out for “fierce wolves [who] will come among you, not sparing the flock... Therefore be alert” (Acts 20:29-31). The Nicolaitan spirit tells us not to be rigorous in teaching or practicing God’s Word. If worship innovations are popular with unbelievers, Nicolaitans adopt them even in violation of Holy Scripture. Nicolaitanism prevails today by a general dread of controversy and doctrinal division in evangelical circles, so that leaders who contend against doctrinal error are accused of spiritual deviancy and denounced as “heresy hunters”. Robert Haldane responds to this attitude: “Those who hold this opinion seem to

⁴ Mounce, 98.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 102.

overlook what every page of the New Testament lays before us. In all the history of the Lord Jesus Christ we never find him out of controversy.”⁶ Like the Christians in Pergamum, most of us today would like to get along with everyone and to enjoy the positive esteem of all. But Jesus says that this is one of the worst things that could be said about any Christian: “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Lk. 6:26). Steve Wilmschurst thus comments:

The New Testament, in fact the whole Bible, commands us to... watch out for anyone and anything who will lead us astray. This is not because we are to be obsessively pedantic about our theology...., but because our God is the God of *truth*, because there is only one way in which we are to be saved and one written Word by which we are to live, and because false teaching destroys God’s people.⁷

It is true that the letter to Ephesus warns us against a cold and unloving orthodoxy (Rev. 2:1-7). Yet here in Pergamum we see the danger on the opposite side, of caring little for doctrinal truth and doing nothing to oppose false teaching when we learn of it. At Pergamum, repentance “would mean exercising church discipline, refusing to tolerate Nicolaitan teaching. The church and its leaders must confront the Nicolaitans,” seeking their repentance.⁸ Jesus says that unless churches are willing to oppose false doctrine and false practice, not accepting or even tolerating heresy, the Roman sword of persecution would not be needed, since Christ’s own sword of discipline would fall on his church: “Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:16).

THE PROMISE OF NEW LIFE

One form of Nicolaitan teaching that is common today among Evangelical Christians is that which says we should not think in terms of overcoming or conquering through our faith in Jesus. We need to accept the fact that we are really no different from others, we are told, that we will never really overcome the power of sin, and

⁶ c.f. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times*, p. ix.

⁷ Steve Wilmschurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 42-3.

⁸ Dennis Johnson, 7.

therefore we should abandon the language of conquering together with Jesus in this world. But this argument is refuted by none other than Jesus Christ himself. He concludes his letter to Pergamum, as he concludes all seven letters, with the words, “To the one who conquers” (Rev. 2:17). To be sure, Jesus does not mean that Christians will in this life overcome all difficulties so as to become virtual gods ourselves. Rather, Jesus refers to his true people who refuse to renounce him but hold fast against all persecution, who zealously uphold true doctrine while refusing heretical teaching, and who embrace the Bible’s call to holiness, refusing to capitulate to the immoral and self-serving standards of a world under God’s judgment. As John put it more briefly: “this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

To all who conquer through faith, Jesus promises three rich blessings. The point of these promises is that believers have no reason to accommodate the world or to seek the world’s favor, given all that we have in Christ. Jesus concludes: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it” (Rev. 2:17).

Manna refers to the supernatural food that fell from heaven during the exodus, enabling God’s people to live and making them strong to follow after God’s leading. Scholars point out a Jewish legend to which Jesus may refer, which states that when Jerusalem was destroyed the prophet Jeremiah took some of the stored manna from the exodus and hid it until the time when the Messiah should come. Whether Jesus had this in mind or not, it is true that he offers spiritual provision out of his great, saving works to strengthen his faithful people in need. William Barclay comments that “to eat of the hidden manna’ meant to enjoy the blessings of the messianic age.”⁹ Douglas Kelly points out the mysterious nature of manna, with its hidden origin in heaven. Of Christ’s faithful people, he explains: “God provides for them, and they do not know where it came from, nor how it got there. It has a heavenly explanation. God is going to take care of you as long as he needs to. His supernatural, overruling providence will take care of you physically and spiritually.”¹⁰

⁹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 105

¹⁰ Douglas F. Kelly, *Revelation*, Mentor Expository Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 52.

In addition, Jesus promises true the believer: “I will give him a white stone” (Rev. 2:17). There were many significant uses of a white, ceremonial stone in the ancient world, called a *tessera*, which may have a connection to Jesus’ meaning. In the athletic games, the most outstanding champions were given a white stone, which conveyed honor to them in the future. In this connection, Barclay writes, “This would mean that Christians are the victorious athletes of Christ who may share in the glory of their Lord.”¹¹

Additionally, a white stone was a token of admission, in contrast to the proverbial “black ball,” which signified refusal. It was especially noteworthy to the Christians of Pergamum, whose faithfulness to Christ meant exclusion from the pagan feasts and festivals, that a white stone was given to grant admission to banquets. The stone that Jesus gives grants access to a far more sumptuous table: the great feast of the Lamb of God in the age to come (see Rev. 19:8-9).

Most importantly, in courts of law, jurors would vote for acquittal by setting forth a white stone, in contrast with a black stone for conviction. Where Satan dwelt in power, faithful Christians were accused and condemned, and some like Antipas were put to the sword for their conviction of fidelity to Jesus Christ. Jesus, in turn, would present a white stone to his justified people. Derek Thomas writes: “Jesus promises to given them the white stone of acquittal – an assurance of eternal life.”¹²

Third, Jesus promises, “a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it” (Rev. 2:17). The new name is likely that of Christ as Lord (Phil. 2:9-11), engraved on each white stone, a name known only by those who receive salvation through faith. Revelation 14:1 speaks of the redeemed each having Christ’s “name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.” Knowing Christ’s new name indicates the believers’ intimate relationship with the Lord of glory. Moreover, just as the name of the Lord made his temple holy, so also are those who receive the “new name written on the stone” signified for their holy duty, calling, and destiny in Christ. G. K. Beale adds: “Therefore, the ‘new name’ is a mark of genuine

¹¹ Barclay, 107.

¹² Derek Thomas, *Let’s Study Revelation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 26.

membership in the community of the redeemed, without which entry into the eternal ‘city of God’ is impossible.”¹³

The importance of the blessings which Jesus promised is made vivid in the example of William Somerset Maugham, one of the greatest writers of the early 20th century. His novel *Of Human Bondage* is a recognized classic, and his play *The Constant Wife* has received thousands of stagings. He enjoyed incredible popularity, receiving an average of 300 fan letters a week, and had fabulous wealth. But his wildest dreams of success failed to satisfy him. His nephew, Robin Maugham, visited him shortly before his death in his villa on the Mediterranean Sea, filled with valuable furniture and works of art and served by eleven servants, including a cook who was the envy of all the other millionaires on the Riviera.

Robin was a Christian and had sent his uncle a Bible. When he arrived, he found Maugham reading Jesus’ words, “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” (Mt. 9:23). Maugham said, “I must tell you, my dear Robin, that the text used to hang opposite my bed when I was a child... Of course, it’s all a lot of bunk. But the thought is quite interesting all the same.” Yet that evening after dinner, Maugham flung himself down onto the sofa: “Oh, Robin, I’m so tired.” Burying his face in his hands, he went on, “I’ve been a failure the whole way through my life.” Robin tried to encourage him: “You’re the most famous writer alive. Surely that means something?” “I wish I’d never written a single word,” he answered. “It’s brought me nothing but misery... And now it’s too late to change. It’s too late...” At that point his face contorted with fear and, staring into space with horror, he shrieked, “Go away! I’m not ready... I’m not dead yet... I’m not dead yet, I tell you...” Then he began to gasp hysterically. Shortly after Robin’s visit, his uncle died.¹⁴

The point of Maugham’s life and death is the very one found in the Scripture he read: “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” What a tragedy for you to live out Maugham’s choice – a choice in favor of false worldly doctrine,

¹³ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 254-5.

¹⁴ Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 201-202.

fleeting worldly sins, and the convicted world's destiny in judgment, when Jesus offers the hidden manna, a white stone, and his new name to all who follow him in true and saving faith.

A CHURCH WHERE SATAN DWELLS

Since Jesus denounces Pergamum as “the throne of Satan,” some Christians might conclude there is no place for the church in such a city. Jesus seems to have thought otherwise, however. So what kind of church, and what kind of Christians, are those needed in the place “where Satan dwells”?

One answer for the kind of Christians we need to be in order to overcome through faith is found in the analogy between Jesus and the manna which long beforehand fell down from heaven. Jesus himself directed us to his own provision for eternal life: “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35).

Let me conclude by noting four ways in which Jesus is like the manna that fell from heaven, and like the bread that gives life to our souls. First, just as manna was necessary for the life of Israel in the desert, so also Jesus is *necessary for our salvation*. Are you trying to live without Jesus? You may satisfy your ego with success, your material needs with money, or your desires with pleasure. But you will never satisfy the inescapable needs of your soul without Jesus Christ.

Second, Jesus, like bread, is *suited for everyone*. James Boice writes: “Jesus is... the Savior of the world, and that includes the peasant as well as the king on his throne... He has what you need. What is more, he knows you and he knows how to meet that need.”¹⁵

Third, just as bread must be chewed and swallowed, Christians must *feed on Jesus and his Word by faith*. The hearts of children are fed by the kind and loving words of their parents. An army feeds on the brave words of its leaders. A nation feeds on the inspiring speeches of its best politicians. But there is nothing compared to the Word of God to feed the soul of every man, woman, and child. If Christians or churches are weak today, easily falling prey to false teaching and

¹⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:478

foolishness seeking to accommodate worldly styles and demands, the explanation may be that we have been feeding on the world instead of on the Word. To be strong in faith and to have a strong witness to the world, we must be feeding constantly on the life-giving bread of Christ and his Word.

Lastly, when Jesus fed the five thousand, we are told that he “broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples” (Mt. 14:19). Likewise, Jesus is the bread of life because *he was broken on the cross for our sins*. “This is my body,” Jesus later explained, “which is broken for you” (1 Cor. 11:24). Jesus gave himself to pay the penalty of our sins, restore us to the Father in love, and grant a new kind of life to those who believe. To them, Jesus gives heavenly manna of divine provision, a white stone of justification through faith alone, and a personal relationship with himself as Lord. How can we know and experience these truths for ourselves? Psalm 34:8 gives us the best advice: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”