

Revelation of Jesus Christ

Study 14

Rev 2:12-17

12 "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." '

For many people in today's church, the term worldliness has a quaint, old-fashioned ring to it.

They associate it with prohibitions against things like dancing, going to the movies, or playing cards.

Today's user friendly, seeker-oriented, market-driven church doesn't preach much against worldliness. To do so might make unbelievers (not to mention many believers) uncomfortable, and is therefore avoided as poor marketing strategy.

But unlike much of the contemporary church, the Bible does not hesitate to condemn worldliness for the serious sin that it is.

Worldliness is any preoccupation with or interest in the temporal system of life that places anything perishable before that which is eternal.

Since believers are not part of the world system:

John 15:19

19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

They must not act as though they were:

Rom 12:2

2 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.

Because they have been redeemed by God's grace, believers are called to:

Titus 2:12-13

12 teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age,

13 looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,

James 1:27

26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.

27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

James 4:4b

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

John 2:15-17

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

16 For all that is in the world--the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life--is not of the Father but is of the world.

17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

This last passage makes it very clear what the believers duty is concerning avoiding worldliness.

The Church at Pergamum like much of today's Church, had failed to heed the Biblical warnings against worldliness.

Consequently, it had drifted into compromise and was in danger of becoming intertwined with the world. That would be the next step in the downward spiral from the Ephesian church's loss of its first love for Jesus Christ.

Conforming to the general pattern of the seven letters, the letter to Pergamum unfolds in seven stages:

The correspondent,

The church,

The city,

The commendation,

The concern,

The command,

The counsel.

THE CORRESPONDENT

Rev 2:12c

'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:

The holder of **the sharp two-edged sword** is the risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ, as indicated in *(Rev 1:16)*.

He, through the inspired apostle John, is the author of this letter.

In this letter, like those to Ephesus and Smyrna, Christ identifies himself using one of the descriptive phrases from John's vision (*1:12-17*)

The sharp **two-edged sword** refers to the Word of God.

Hebrews notes:

Heb 4:12

12 For 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.

The apostle Paul also uses the metaphor of a sword to describe the Word:

Eph 6:17

17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;

That the sword is **two-edged** depicts the Word's potency and power in exposing and judging the innermost thoughts of the human heart.

The Word never wields a dull edge.

This description of the Lord Jesus pictures Him as judge and executioner.

Describing His appearance at the Second Coming.

Rev 19:15

15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

This is not a positive, promising introduction; it is a threatening one.

It is the first negative introduction of Christ because the Pergamum church faced imminent judgment.

Disaster loomed on the horizon for this worldly church; it is but a short step from compromising with the world to forsaking God altogether and facing His wrath.

The church at Pergamum is symbolic of the many churches throughout history that have compromised with the world.

That spirit of compromise was especially evident during the period from the fourth to the seventh centuries.

In A. D. 313 the emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, granting religious freedom to the Christian and ending two and a half centuries of savage persecution.

He adopted Christianity and made it a favored religion of the empire. That began the process by which Christianity merged with the roman state.

Heathen priests became Christian priests; heathen temples became Christian churches; heathen feasts became Christian festivals.

Christianity was no longer a personal matter, but a national identity. The church married the political system, so that worldliness was synonymous with the church.

Today, in some ways, worldliness is still rampant in the church.

Churches, even entire denominations, have departed from the true faith and embraced the world philosophically and morally.

And in some places, state churches still exist in spiritually impotent forms.

Like the church at Pergamum, they fall under judgment by the Lord of the true church.

THE CHURCH

Rev 2:12a

“the church in Pergamum”

The book of Acts does not record the founding of the church at Pergamum. According to *(Acts 16:7-8)* Paul passed through Mysia (the region in which Pergamum was located) on his second missionary journey, but there is no record that the apostle either preached the gospel or founded a church there at that time.

Most likely, the church at Pergamum was founded during Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, when the gospel went out from there to be preached through the province of Asia *(Acts 19:10)*.

Because the church was surrounded by the pagan culture, it was exposed continually to its allurements, strengthened by familiar sins.

It also faced severe animosity from the persecuting emperor worshipers.

THE CITY

Rev 2:12b

“Pergamum”

Pergamum was about 100 miles north of Ephesus, with Smyrna located about halfway in between.

Unlike Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamum was not a port city, but was located about fifteen miles inland from the Aegean Sea.

Nor was it on any of the major trade routes. Yet, as its ancient capital, Pergamum was considered Asia’s greatest city.

The Roman writer Pliny called it **“by far the most distinguished city in Asia”** (cited in Robert H. Mounce, *The book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 95)

By the time John penned Revelation, Pergamum had been Asia's capital for almost 250 years (since 133 B.C., when its last king bequeathed his kingdom to Rom)

Pergamum survives today as the Turkish city of Bergama.

Much of Pergamum was built on a large, conical hill towering some one thousand feet above the plain.

So impressive is the site even in modern times that the famed nineteenth-century archaeologist Sir William Ramsay commented, "**Beyond all other sites in Asia Minor it gives the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority; the rocky hill on which it stand is so huge, and dominates the broad plain of the Caicus [River valley] so proudly and boldly**" (*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Albany, Oreg.: AGES Software; reprint of the 1904 edition],226).

Pergamum's huge library (200,000 hand written volumes) was second only to that of Alexandria.

So impressive was Pergamum's library that Mark Antony later sent it to his lover, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt.

According to legend, parchment (or vellum) was invented by the Pergamenes to provide writing material for their library.

Seeking to build a library rivaling the one in Alexandria, a third-century B.C. Pergamene king attempted to lure the librarian of the Alexandrian library to his city. Unfortunately, the Egyptian ruler got wind of the plan, refused to allow the librarian to leave, and in retaliation prohibited the further export of papyrus to Pergamum.

Out of necessity, the Pergamenes developed parchment, made of treated animal skins, for use as writing material.

Though parchment was actually know from a thousand years earlier in Egypt, the Pergamenes were responsible for its widespread use in the ancient world.

In fact, the parchment may derive from a form of the word Pergamum.

Because of its library, Pergamum was an important center of culture and learning.

The Physician Galen, second only in prominence to Hippocrates was born and studied in Pergamum.

The city saw itself as the defender of Greek culture in Asia Minor.

A large frieze around the base of the altar of Zeus commemorates the victory of the Pergamenes over the invading barbarian Gauls.

Pergamum was an important center of worship for four of the main deities of the Greco-Roman world, and temples dedicated to Athena, Asklepios, Dionysos, and Zeus were located there. But overshadowing the worship of all those deities was Pergamum's devotion to the cult of emperor worship.

Pergamum built the first temple devoted to emperor worship in Asia in 29 B.C., in honor of Emperor Augustus, Later the city would build two more such temples, honoring the emperors Trajan and Septimus Severus.

The city became the center of emperor worship in the province, and there, more than in any other city in Asia, Christians were in danger of harm from the emperor worship cult.

Elsewhere Christians were primarily in danger on the one day per year they were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor; in Pergamum they were in danger every day.

It is likely that the martyr Antipas **"2:13"** was executed, at least in part, for refusing to worship the emperor.

THE COMMENDATION

Rev 2:13

***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.*

Despite the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves, the believers at Pergamum courageously maintained their faith in Jesus Christ.

He commended them for continuing to **hold fast** His **name**, even though they lived **where Satan's throne is, where Satan dwells**.

Many suggestions have been offered as to the identification of **Satan's throne**.

Some identify it with the magnificent altar of Zeus that dominated Pergamum's acropolis.

This was not simply an altar, as Edwin Yamauchi notes:

The word *alter* is somewhat misleading. The structure is a monumental colonnaded court in the form of a horseshoe, 120 by 112 feet.

The podium of the altar was nearly 18 feet high.

The great Frieze which ran at the base of the structure for 446 feet, depicted a gigantic battle of the gods and the giants.

It was one of the greatest works of Hellenistic art. (*New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* [Grand Rapids: Baker 1980],35-36)

Such an impressive structure could easily merit the designation **Satan's throne**.

If that were the reason or the many other reasons given such as the worship of the god Asklepios that was symbolized as a snake, supposedly known for healing, many from all over the world came to be healed in the temple.

It might have been because of the Emperor worship, but whatever it was it was under the rule and reign of the god of this world. Thus Satan's domain and thus **Satan's throne**.

Under all of this difficulty and the believers continued to **dwell** a word that speaks of permanently residence as opposed to merely passing through, in Pergamum.

In Modern terms they hung in there despite the persecution and suffering they endured, the believers at Pergamum continue to **hold fast** the **name** of Christ, **and did not deny** the **faith**.

They did not deviate from fidelity to Christ or to the central truths of the Christian faith.

The faithful believers at Pergamum exemplified the truth of Christ's words:

Matt 16:18

18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

No amount of satanic opposition can destroy genuine saving faith such as those believers possessed.

The church at Pergamum maintained its faithfulness **even in the days of Antipas**, whom Christ described as **My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you**.

Nothing certain is known about Antipas apart from this text. He was probably one of the leaders of the Pergamum church.

According to tradition, he was roasted to death inside a brass bull during the persecution instigated by Emperor Domitian.

Witness, translates *martus*, a word that eventually became transliterated into English as the word martyr, because so many witnesses for Christ paid with their lives.

Here was a man who paid the ultimate price for his refusal to compromise. Because of his faithfulness, the Risen Lord commended Antipas with a title used elsewhere to refer to Himself.

Rev 1:5; 3:14

5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood,

14 "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

Antipas's faithfulness and courage were a rebuke to those at Pergamum who were tempted to compromise with the world.

Next week we will look at the Concern, the Command, and the Counsel.