



To the Church in Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17

The opening description of Jesus which we find in this letter sets the tone for what is to come. Verse 12 describes Jesus as the one who has 'has the sharp, double-edged sword.' We have already been told, in 1:16, that this sword comes out of his mouth, leading us to anticipate words of judgment for the Church in Pergamum.

Like Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamum was another city where pagan worship was the prevailing norm, with temples dedicated to other gods including Zeus and Athena. The New Testament scholar Ben Witherington notes that, 'At the very top of the city's acropolis was an imposing altar to Zeus "the Saviour." This sculpture also included images of snakes, so perhaps this is what John is alluding to when he refers to the throne of Satan.'¹

The Christians of Pergamum are commended by Jesus for the faithfulness they have shown in this hostile environment. 'Yet you remain true to my name' (v13). This faithfulness has come at great cost, including the death of a Christian, Antipas, who is described as a 'faithful witness,' a phrase which mirrors exactly the description of Jesus found in 1:5. As we read of the suffering of Antipas, words of Jesus himself come to our minds: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (John 15:20).

Having commended the church for remaining true, the tone of this letter changes with the 'nevertheless' which we find at the start of verse 14. It appears that there are some in the church who have succumbed to idolatrous theology and practices, described here as 'the teaching of Balaam.' It seems unlikely that there was an actual teacher with this name in the church in Pergamum. In the same way that the Roman Empire is referred to as Babylon, this seems to be a case of John writing about a present problem using terms found in the Old Testament. We find the story of Balaam in Numbers, when he is consulted by the king of Moab who wants him to place a curse on the Israelites. Grant Osborne explains that, 'There is no record of Balaam advising Balak, but in Numbers 25:1-3 the Israelites are described as succumbing to immorality with the pagan women and idolatry in worshipping Baal, and in Num. 31:16 Moses attributed the action of the Moabite women to "Balaam's advice."²

The failure of the church in Pergamum seems to relate to both their practices and their beliefs. Some in the church have eaten meat sacrificed to idols in pagan worship while others have committed sexual immorality. The Nicolaitans are also referred to in the earlier Letter to the Church in Ephesus (which has resisted their

¹ Ben Witherington, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Revelation*, 2003, 102

² Grant Osborne, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Revelation*, 2002, 143-144

teaching), but there is no consensus among scholars on the exact nature of their heresy. The command to 'repent' which we find in verse 16 is expressed in particularly vivid terms. If the church itself cannot tackle these problems, Jesus himself will do so in an uncompromising manner.

Another Old Testament image is found in the word of promise which is offered to those who listen to respond in obedience to Jesus. Those who are resistant to food sacrificed to idols will be rewarded with manna from heaven! An explanation of the significance of the 'white stone' mentioned in verse 17 is offered by Tom Wright:

'Pergamum's great buildings were made of a black local stone. When people wanted to put up inscriptions, they obtained white marble on which to carve them. This was then fixed to the black buildings, where it stood out more clearly. In addition – and this may tie in with the 'hidden manna' – there was a custom of guests at a feast being given a stone with their name on it as a ticket of admission.'³

1. It appears that the church in Pergamum has not been able to resist the pressure of its surrounding culture. Can you think of temptations in our own society in 2019 which could cause the church to lose its distinctiveness?
2. In what ways does the description of 'your city' in verse 13 change your understanding of the challenges facing this church?
3. We can't be sure of the exact danger which was posed by the Nicolaitans, but it was clearly serious enough to be mentioned in two of these seven letters. How can we ensure we remain committed to sound theology in a culture where an emphasis on tolerance and inclusion makes it increasingly difficult to challenge the views of others?
4. This letter both starts and ends with a reference to the sword which comes out of Jesus' mouth? How does that image impact the way you think about the rest of what he says in his letter?
5. The choice which Jesus asks this church to make could be thought of as one which comes down to 'food sacrificed to idols' or 'hidden manna.' Can you think of a time when you've experienced God's presence or provision in a way which helped you overcome a temptation you faced?

³ Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 2011, 23