

Pentwater Bible Church

Revelation Message 6

October 1, 2023



Saul (Battle against the Philistines on the Gilboa) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder cir. 1562

Daniel E. Woodhead – Pastor Teacher

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THE CHURCH OF PERGAMOS

October 1, 2023

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PERGAMOM: THE CHURCH OF THE AGE OF CONSTANTINE (A.D. 313-600)

Revelation 2:12-17

¹² And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; ¹³ I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. ¹⁵ So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it (KJV)

Pergamum means “thoroughly or mixed married.” It is also referred to by its later Greek form Pergamos. Pergamum is first mentioned in secular history by Xenophon who was a contemporary of Plato and a fellow student of Socrates that lived from 430 to 354 B.C. Its library was second only to that of Alexandria. Mark Antony took it to Egypt, and gave it to Cleopatra. Parchment gets its name from Pergamum, and Galen the physician who was the most influential physician and medical researcher in the Roman Empire was born there in 129 AD. Pliny the Roman wrote a description that still exists called the *Bergamah*, or *Bergma*; which has reference to its buildings and its ruins which are reminders of the once magnificent public edifices which have caused it to be described as a city of temples. It was described as a sort of union of a pagan cathedral city, a university town, and a royal residence. Its idolatrous practices were frequent and various, and the contamination which they spread is condemned by Jesus from this epistle. This is the church that represents the age of Constantine in which the church was married to the state. It was Constantine's “edict of toleration” that started the process and it came to fruition with Theodosius II forced conversions that the church actually fell. With the church and state merging and the forced conversions pagan practices entered the church.

It was during this period that ten false doctrines were introduced into the church:

1. Justification by works—Not simply by grace through faith;
2. Baptismal regeneration—That a person is saved by baptism;
3. Worship of images;
4. Celibacy—Forbidding priests to marry, a further distinction between clergy and laity;

5. Confessionalism—Where sins are confessed to a priest who then declares absolution of those sins;
6. Purgatory—A place of confinement which is neither Heaven nor Hell, but a place where one has to be refined before going into Heaven, and so sanctification was not complete at death;
7. Transubstantiation—The concept of the continual and perpetual sacrifice of Jesus;
8. Indulgences—Where through the giving of money, a person's time in purgatory could be reduced;
9. Penance—Involving the torment of one's body in order to reduce time in purgatory; and
10. Mariolatry—The worship of the virgin Mary, her elevation as the mother of God, and the declaration of her deity.

The church had regional bishops already. The Lord's half-brother James was the Bishop of Jerusalem until he was martyred. Now the bishop of Rome was suddenly imbued with extraordinary power and a large increase in members along with wealth. Idolatry entered the church, as Jesus became one of many gods the pagans worshipped. This led to spiritual fornication and idolatry. It planted the seeds for the formation of what would become the Roman Catholic Church. They were rightly condemned for holding the teachings of Balaam. They were also condemned for holding the teachings of the Nicolaitans. While the Ephesians were against this practice the Pergamum Church tolerated it. It was during this period of church history and that the distinction began between the clergy and the laity with different sets of laws and regulations for each group flourished. A priestly order was set up in the church that further corrupted and laid the foundation for what was to follow in the next phase of church history.

JESUS KNOWS WHAT THEY HAVE DONE

Revelation 2:12-13

¹² And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; ¹³ I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth (KJV).

Jesus the Savior, is represented in the vision, "uttered words, as they proceeded from his mouth, as a two-edged sword. The words which proceeded from his mouth cut hard and penetrate deep, and it was easy to picture Him as having a sword proceeding from His mouth; that is, His words were as piercing as a sharp sword. As he was about to reprove the church at Pergamos, there was a propriety in referring to this power of the Savior. Reproof cuts deep; and this is the idea represented here. The Words of Jesus is exactly as the Bible presents God's Word in the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 4:12

¹² For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (KJV).

The throne of Satan refers to the infamous idolatry practised at Pergamum, which had a cluster of temples to Zeus, Apollo, Athene, Dionysus, Aphrodite, and Æsculapius. These all lay together in a beautiful grove called the Nicephorium, the pride of Pergamum, as the temple of Artemis was the pride of Ephesus. Some have thought that the mention of Satan points to the serpent, which is so prominent in the cultus of Æsculapius which flourished there. He was the Greek god of healing and the serpent symbol is used today as a symbol of medical healing. The context is better to understand the reference to him because of the abominations connected with the worship of Dionysus and Aphrodite. Satan now has access to both the throne of God in Heaven and the earth (Job 1:6–7). Because of the high degree of organized open sin Jesus refers to Pergamum as Satan’s earthly headquarters.

Jesus gives us further recognition of Satan at the close of the verse. Pergamum was where Satan lives. The saints there were commended for being true, even when Antipas (which means “against all”) was martyred. Nothing is known for certain of this incident. The Christians at Pergamum had been true to God under severe testing but had compromised their testimony in other ways.

BALAAM

Revelation 2:14–15

¹⁴ But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication ¹⁵ So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate (KJV).

This church is condemned for allowing some to hold the teachings of Balaam, *Who taught Balac to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel*. The word *stumbling-block* properly means anything over which one falls or stumbles, and then anything over which anyone may fall into sin, or which becomes the occasion of one’s falling into sin. The meaning here is, that it was through the instructions of Balaam that Balak learned the way by which the Israelites might be led into sin, and might thus bring upon themselves the Divine destruction.

Because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam. It is not necessary to suppose that they held to the same opinion as Balaam, or openly taught the same doctrines. The meaning is, that they taught substantially the same doctrine which Balaam did, and deserved to be aligned with him. The summary of the doctrine is stated in the next part of the verse.

The main story in this case were these six stages:

(1) Balak, king of Moab, when the children of Israel approached his borders, thought that he could not war successfully against them with such a large number. This view of the Jews approaching caused Balak's people to be dispirited and disheartened at their numbers, (Numbers 22:3, 4).

(2) He resolved to send for someone who had a distinguished reputation as a prophet, that he might "curse" that people, in order, to ensure their destruction, and raise the spirit of his own people in making war on them. They believed that prophets had the power of blighting anything by their curse. For this reason, he sent messengers to Balaam to invite him to come and perform this service, (Numbers 22:5, 6).

(3) Balaam professed to be a prophet of the Lord, and it was obviously proper that he should inquire of the Lord whether he should comply with this request. He did so, and was positively forbidden to go, (Numbers 22:12).

(4) When the answer of Balaam was reported to Balak, he sent some distinguished messengers with a higher compensated offer if he would come, (Numbers 22:15–17).

(5) Balaam was strongly inclined to go, but, only if Balak would give him his house full of silver and gold would he do no more, and say no more, than the Lord permitted, and he proposed again to consult the Lord, to see if he could obtain permission to go with the messengers of Balak. He obtained permission, but with the express injunction that he was only to utter what God should say; and when he came to Balak, he only continued to bless the Hebrew people, until, in disgust and indignation, Balak sent him away again to his own land, (Numbers 22, 23, 24:10).

(6) Balaam returned to his own house, but evidently with a desire still to gratify Balak. Being forbidden to curse the people of Israel; having been overruled by the Lord he continued to bless them when he was himself more than willing to curse them; and having still a desire to comply with the wishes of Balak the King of Moab, he thought about some way in which the curse of God might come upon the Hebrew people, and they might become objects of God's wrath. To do this he resolved to have the females of Moab, entice the Hebrew men into sexual relationships. This was accomplished and the women also drew the men into idolatry which spread through the camp of Israel. licentiousness spread everywhere so God sent a plague upon them to punish them, (Numbers 25:1), This was planned and instigated by Balaam. He had a strong desire to do that which he knew was wrong, and which was forbidden by God. He was restrained by internal checks and prevented from doing what he intended to do. He fretted about for some way in which he might do it. He finally accomplished the same thing in fact, though in a form different from that which he had first prepared. This is what often occurs in the plans and purposes of the wicked. The meaning in the passage to this church is, that in the church at Pergamos there were those who taught, substantially, the same thing that Balaam did; that is, the tendency of whose teaching was to lead men into idolatry, and the ordinary accompaniment of idolatry—licentiousness.

To eat things sacrificed unto idols. Balaam taught the Hebrews to do this—perhaps in some way securing their attendance on the riotous and gluttonous feasts of idolatry celebrated among the people among whom they sojourned. Such feasts were commonly held in idol temples, and they usually led to scenes of dissipation and corruption. By plausibly teaching that there could be no harm in eating what had been offered in sacrifice—since an idol was nothing, and the flesh of

animals offered in sacrifice was the same as if slaughtered for some other purpose, it would seem that these teachers at Pergamos had induced professing Christians to attend on those feasts—thus lending them into worshipping idols, idolatry, and exposing themselves to all the corruption and licentiousness that are in these celebrations.

And to commit fornication. Balaam taught this; and that was the tendency of the doctrines inculcated at Pergamos. On what pretence this was done is not said; but it is clear that the church had regarded this in a lenient manner. So accustomed had the heathen world been to this vice, that many who had been converted from idolatry might be disposed to look on it with less severity than we do now, and there was a necessity of incessant watchfulness lest the members of the church should fall into it.

No doubt in the city of Pergamum intermarriage with the pagan world was a real problem. Because civil and religious life were so intertwined, social engagements meant some involvement with paganism. In the age of Constantine, the church became married to the state which, eventually resulted in spiritual fornication and idolatry. Now that the church was made a state religion, people all over the Roman Empire were baptized into the church without any regard to personal faith. By simply being baptized, they were able to join the new establishment. As a result, a massive number of pagans entered the church bringing many of their pagan practices with them. Idolatry entered the church as these people added Jesus to the many other gods that they already had. This led to spiritual fornication and idolatry. It planted the seeds for what later developed into the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, they were rightly condemned for holding to the teachings of Balaam. *Second*, in verse 15, they are condemned for permitting the teachings of the Nicolaitans. The very group that Ephesus was commended for not tolerating, Pergamum was condemned for tolerating. The division between the clergy and the laity with different sets of laws and regulations for each group was tolerated here to Jesus opposition. A priestly order was set up in the church that further corrupted and laid the foundation for what was to follow in the next phase of the Church Age.

REPENT SAYS JESUS

Revelation 2:16–17

¹⁶ Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth ¹⁷ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it (KJV)

This “coming,” like that of verse 5, is not our Lord’s second advent, but His entering *personally* and that *quickly*, upon their affairs *judicially*. These affairs which otherwise would continue unchanged under the ever-present, although grieved and vexed, Spirit. “War ... with the sword of my mouth,” brings to mind at once the angel of the Lord standing with his sword drawn against the mad prophet, Balaam, in Israel. The targets of Christ’s sword would be chiefly those practicing these evils, “against *them*.” The exact way in which Christ would use the sword of His Word against these corrupters, He does not explain. However, we know Christ’s words to the Jews, “if I

had not come and spoken unto them ... but now they have no excuse for their sin.” And we know that Paul and his efforts were *a sweet savor of Christ unto God*.

II Corinthians 2:15–17

¹⁵ For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: ¹⁶ To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ (KJV).

The Spirit is still speaking, and “to the churches,” that is, to all of them throughout this church age. Listen up.

Will I give to eat of the hidden manna. The true spiritual food; the food that nourishes the soul. The idea is, that the souls of those who “overcame,” or who gained the victory in their conflict with sin, and in the persecutions and trials of the world, would be permitted to partake of that spiritual food which is laid up for the people of God, and by which they will be nourished for ever. The Hebrews were supported by manna in the desert (Exodus 16:16–35); a pot of that manna was laid up in the most holy place, to be preserved as a memorial in the Ark of The Covenant (Exodus 16:32–34); it is called “angels’ food” (Psalm 78:25), and “corn of heaven” (Psalm 78:24); and it would be emblematical of that spiritual food by which the people of God are to be fed from heaven, in their journey through this world. By the word “*hidden*,” there is an allusion to that which was laid up in the pot before the ark of the covenant, and the blessing which is promised here is that they would be nourished *as if* they were sustained by that manna thus laid up before the ark: by food from the immediate presence of God. The language thus explained would mean that they who overcome will be nourished through this life *as if* by that “hidden manna;” that is, that they will be supplied all along through the “wilderness of this world” by that food from the immediate presence of God which their souls require.

And will give him a white stone. There are a variety of opinions in regard to the meaning of this expression, and almost no two expositors agree. Illustrations of its meaning have been sought from Grecian, Hebrew, and Roman customs, but none of these have removed all difficulty from the expression. The general sense of the language seems plain, even though the allusion on which it is founded is obscure, or even unknown. It is, that the Savior would give him who overcame a token of his favour which would have some word or name inscribed on it, and which would be of use to him alone, or intelligible to him only: that is, some secret token which would make him sure of the favor of his Redeemer, and which would be unknown to other men. The idea here would find a correspondence in the evidences of his favor granted to the soul of the Christian himself; in the pledge of heaven thus made to him, and which he would understand, but which no one else would understand.

NEXT WEEK: REVELATION MSG. VII

Please call or e-mail with any questions or comments

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