

***Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas***  
***Fredericksburg Bible Church***  
*107 East Austin*  
*Fredericksburg, Texas 78624*  
*830-997-8834    jthomas@fbgbible.org*

**A0519 -- May. 8, 2005 – Revelation 2: 12-17 – Pergamum: Church of Tolerance**

First memory device in the book is given in Revelation 1:19 which gives a three-fold structure to the book.

- |              |   |         |
|--------------|---|---------|
| 1) 1:11-20   | "The Things Which John Saw"                           | Past    |
| 2) 2:1-3:22  | "The Things Which Are"                                | Present |
| 3) 4:1-22:21 | "The Things Which Will Take Place After These Things" | Future  |

This memory device will help you remember the chronology of events from Christ's crucifixion until the end of time. The **"things which John saw"** refers to the vision of the Ascended and Glorified Son of Man in 1:11-20. Christ Ascended and was Glorified in Acts 1:7-10, Thursday, May 14, 33AD, and He will ever remain the Glorified Son of Man. When He returns to wipe out His enemies and establish His millennial kingdom this will be His appearance (Matt 16:27 - 17:9). **"the things which are"** refer to the things that were present in John's day (96AD) and are described in chapters 2-3. The things which are refer to the Church Age or Dispensation in which believing Jews and Gentiles are united into one new man, the body of Christ, which is the Church. The Church began on the Day of Pentecost, Sunday, May 24, 33AD, and will end at the pre-trib Rapture. This is a distinct body of redeemed Jews and Gentiles. Lastly, **"the things which will take place after these things"** refers to the future events which have yet to begin. They will start when the Antichrist signs a firm covenant with the leaders of Israel. So, that gives the three-fold structure of Revelation. Today I'm going to give you a second memory device. There are seven groups of seven.

There are seven blessings, seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpet, seven key figures, seven bowls, seven dooms on Babylon.

- |    |             |   |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1) | 7 Blessings | 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14       |
| 2) | 7 Churches  | 2:1-7; 8-11; 12-17; 18-29; 3:1-6; 7-13; 14-22 |

- |    |                    |            |
|----|--------------------|------------|
| 3) | 7 Seals            | 6:1-8:5    |
| 4) | 7 Trumpets         | 8:7-11:19  |
| 5) | 7 Key Figures      | 12:1-13:18 |
| 6) | 7 Bowls            | 15:1-16:21 |
| 7) | 7 Dooms on Babylon | 17:1-18:24 |

This gives you some additional memory devices to help you keep the whole book in mind so you can recall it and obey the commandments written in it. The imminence of Christ's coming in chapters 2-3 should be a motivation to become an overcomer. The one who overcomes is the one who overcomes the tug of the world culture which says to reject Jesus Christ as your Savior. The one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God overcomes the world. If you are already a believer in Jesus as the Son of God then they challenge for you, as an individual, is to repent of any of the habitual sin patterns described in these letters to the seven churches.

Today we are looking at Pergamum: Church of Compromise. Let's read the passage from the NASB.

**Revelation 2:12-17** <sup>12</sup> "And to the messenger of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: <sup>13</sup> 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. <sup>14</sup> 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts of immorality*. <sup>15</sup> 'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup> 'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. <sup>17</sup> 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

The letter can be outlined as follows:

- Recipient, Destination and Description of Christ (2:12)
- Commendation (2:13)
- Condemnation (2:14-15)
- Exhortation (2:16-17a)

Promise (2:17b)

## **Recipient, Destination, and Description of Christ (2:12)**

### **Greek Text 2:12**

**Translation 2:12 "And to the messenger of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:**

The recipient is a human messenger who is a spiritual representative of **the church in Pergamum**. The city name **Pergamum** (or sometimes **Pergamos**, also in 1:11) means “parchment”. **Pergamum** is the city where “parchment” was first invented. This writing material was made of animal skins in distinction from the papyrus paper made in Alexandria, Egypt. The Book of Revelation was originally penned on a scroll of papyrus paper about 15 feet long and sent with the seven human messengers from Patmos to Ephesus, then to Smyrna and now to Pergamum. Their party had now dropped to five in number as they traveled 55 miles north of Smyrna to the City of Parchment (Pergamum).

The destination of Pergamum was not a port city, it was 20 miles inland and during John’s day the city had become a major center of idolatry.

Much of the cities wealth went toward building temples, statues, and altars devoted to idol worship. This is why it is called the location of Satan’s throne in verse 13. Four temples had been built there. One for Zeus, the savior-god (now re-located to Germany), one for Athena, the victory-bearing goddess, one for Dionysos, the “bull” god of the royal family, and one for Asklepios, the serpent “god of healing”. This last god, Asklepios, the serpent “god of healing” is where our modern serpents found on ambulances and other medical symbols are derived. It is interesting that biblically, the “serpent” was not a healer of human life but a destroyer of it. Sick people traveled to Pergamum and would spend the night in the dark temple of Asklepios where non-poisonous snakes slithered about. If a person was touched by one of these snakes (the god himself) then he would be healed.

In addition to these four temples, Pergamum was the first city in Asia to have a temple devoted to Roman emperor worship (29BC). A sixth temple, dedicated to Emperor Trajan, was also built a bit later. So, the city was a leader in cult worship and earned the title “temple sweeper (or warden)” (*neokoros*). Caesar worship here was very intense and Christians were in danger daily if they did not burn incense on the altar and hail Caesar as Lord.

Lastly, the city is the noted birthplace of Galen the Physician who was second only to Hippocrates in the ancient world and it held one of the greatest libraries of the ancient world. The library was second only to the great library in Alexandria, Egypt, holding 200,000 volumes. This should be no surprise since Alexandria was the major production plant of papyrus and Pergamum invented parchment animal skins. This great library was transported to Alexandria under Cleopatra and the library was, unfortunately, burned in 642AD by the Saracens.

The description of Christ as **the One who has the sharp two-edged sword** comes from chapter 1:16 and is used again in verse 16 as Christ's weapon of judgment. If you recall, the **sharp two-edged sword** was a Roman Sword of Thracian origin (*romphaia*). The Thracian sword had a large blade but was short, double edged, and shaped like a human tongue. The sword was a very deadly weapon because it was extremely sharp and the wielder could strike his opponent from either direction. Here, and in chapter 1:16, the sword symbolizes the word of Christ as an instrument of judgment. Jesus is pictured as the supreme warrior defeating His enemies in battle by the use of His word which is a sharp two-edged sword (also 2:16; 19:15, 21).

### **3 Commendations (2:13)**

#### **Greek Text 2:13**

**Translation 2:13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.**

Next we have the commendation in v. 13. Christ points out that He **knows** three things. 1) **I know where you dwell**, 2) **I know...where Satan's throne is**, and 3) **I know...you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.**

First, Christ says **I know where you dwell**. This simply means Christ knows where they reside, they have taken up permanent residency in Pergamum.

Second, Christ says, **I know...where Satan's throne is**. Christ's omniscience enables Him to know **where Satan** had set up his control center and it was presently in the city of Pergamum. Why is Pergamum said to be the location of **Satan's throne**? Several of the seven cities were places of idolatry and cult worship but Pergamum stood above them all.

There were six temples, four devoted to gods or goddesses and 2 devoted to Emperor Worship. It is these latter two temples devoted to Emperor Worship which set Pergamum apart from the other cities. Pergamum led all the cities in its strict emperor worship and Rome had a strong presence in this city of Asia. They had the power of the sword which meant they had the power of capital punishment. At the end of verse 13 we find **Antipas** who had been a faithful martyr and had been capitally punished by the Romans for not worshipping the emperor. In the Roman Empire in those days there were a myriad of gods and goddesses. When the Empire introduced Emperor worship, worship of Caesar was just like introducing one more god. You didn't have to give up worshipping all the other gods; you simply had to add the worship of Caesar. But the Christians who operated off of the New Testament were taught that there is only one God and that He alone is to be worshipped. They could not, in good conscience, worship God and Caesar. But the Romans had a hard time understanding this. They interpreted their refusal to worship Caesar as outright treason against the Roman Empire and punishable by death. We saw this persecution in Smyrna last week but the thing that stood out in Pergamum was the intensity of Emperor Worship. Here a person could be called to offer incense on the altar of the Emperor and say "Caesar is Lord" on any day of the year, whereas in Smyrna this day came only once a year and was more easily avoided. Emperor worship was viewed by Christians as a sign of Satan's power and therefore Christ says of Pergamum that he **knows where Satan's throne is**.

Thirdly, Christ says, **I know...you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells**. First, they **held fast** Christ's **name**. In spite of the Roman dangers of capital punishment, they did not shrink back from preaching and teaching in Christ's name. Instead they **held fast to** His name. The early apostles underwent similar threats of violence for even speaking in Christ's name (e.g. Acts 4:17; 5:28; 9:21). Second, neither did they **deny** Christ's **faith**. They had stayed true to their trusting in Christ. It is very easy for Christians to deny faith in Christ when under persecution. Peter denied our Lord three times. But Peter is not alone. America has yet to see the kind of persecution that these Christians in Pergamum were seeing but it is not unthinkable that it will eventually take over our homeland. The persecutions in American today are intellectual. The universities are full of intellectual persecution that will erupt into full scale physical persecution against this or a later generation. You walk into a university classroom and Christians are mocked, discriminated against, particularly on the doctorate level. If the professors discover that you are a creationist then your fellowship funding somehow dries up. Degrees are not awarded. This is going on all over the United States. Sure, the immorality on these campuses is horrible but where the real persecution is going on is in the classrooms where

Christians are deliberately picked out and mocked and in the professor's offices where Christian students are taken advantage of and discriminated against. You think Satan doesn't have an agenda on these campuses. These kids are the leaders of tomorrow and the professors have a program for your children. The bottom line of this program is to destroy your child's faith in Christ and replace it with autonomous reasoning and the religion of humanism<sup>1</sup>. And your good money is going to fund these anti-Christian campaigns. If Christians don't stand up and do something about it at this root level I can guarantee that your children or grandchildren will eventually experience physical persecution in our nation.

The man who had remained faithful even to death was a man named **Antipas**. We know nothing about him except what is found here, that Christ Himself says he was **a faithful witness who was killed** in Pergamum **where Satan dwells**. The word for **witness** is *martus* and originally meant "witness" but was transitioning to the new meaning of "martyr". The first martyr in church history, Stephen (Acts 7), was first referred to as a *martus* in the sense of "martyr" in Acts 22:20. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century this was the word used to describe all Christian "martyrs". **Antipas** was the first of many **martyrs** in Pergamum because he was faithful. Many Christians today are terrified by the huge political structure that overarches our country and are unwilling to remain faithful to death. But that is precisely how strong our faith is supposed to be. Remember, if you are hated by the world and faithful to death then you are loved by Christ and He will consider you a faithful martyr, worthy of the halls of delight and splendor which He has prepared for you from the foundations of the world.

## 2 Condemnations (2:14-15)

### Greek Text 2:14-15

**Translation 2:14-15 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold fast the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. <sup>15</sup> 'So you also have some who in the same way hold fast the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**

Nevertheless, there are two condemnations against the messenger and the church as a whole. The big problem is their toleration of two groups of people among their number who hold fast to two false teachings: the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans. The faithful do not hold to these teachings but they are condemned for being indifferent and tolerating it. First, the Balaamites. **Balaam** comes from two Hebrew words (*bala* – "he swallows" and *am* – "people". Thus it means "swallowers of the people". The background story of

**Balaam** is found in Num 22-24 and 31:16. If you remember the story, the King of Moab, Balak incited the converted diviner **Balaam** to prophesy against the people of Israel. Yet every time **Balaam** opened his mouth he blessed Israel rather than cursing them. However, Num 31:16 shows that **Balaam** counseled Balak to provoke the Israelites into worshipping idols. If they did then Israel would forfeit God's protection, which he did. This incident made a deep impression on generations of Israelites. Apparently, what Balak did was provoke the Israelites into worshipping idols through sexual immorality and intermarrying with the heathen Moabites. Balaam's teaching literally led to the swallowing of 24,000 Israelites.

In this context the church is condemned for tolerating those **who hold fast the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel**. The two stumbling blocks mentioned are **eating things sacrifices to idols and committing acts of immorality**. The word **stumbling block** is *skandalon* and refers to the trigger on a trap such as a stick propping up a box. **Balaam** had taught **Balak** that if he laid a trap for Israel she would touch the trigger and it would capture her in idolatry. Balak's plan was implemented in Num 25:1-2 where the Moabite daughters literally threw themselves in front of the people of Israel and invited them to sacrifice to their gods and the plan worked. One of the groups at the church in Pergamum was apparently throwing traps at others. One of the traps was convincing people to attend idolatrous feasts. The Balaamites were morally indifferent to such feasts but this was contra the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:20, 29. These feasts were an integral part of social life in many ancient cities. To break with them would be extremely difficult. When boys and girls got around one another at these feasts it naturally lead to the second sin of immorality (Swete). This is what we call "compound carnality". The word for **immorality** is *porneuo* and refers to any kind of sexual perversion (literally "to commit fornication"). This was also condemned by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:20, 29, yet nothing is being done! This group is luring people into sexually deviant acts and the church is just standing by and tolerating it. It is no wonder Christ chides them for tolerating these sinful teachings and practices. This was "swallowing the people" in the same way **Balaam's** teaching swallowed 24,000 Israelites.

Second, in v. 15 we have a second group in the Pergamum church who **hold fast** to the teaching of the **Nicolaitans**. The word **Nicolaitans** comes from two Greek words (*nikao* – "to conquer" and *laos* – "people"). Thus it means "conquerors of the people" whereas **Balaam** meant "swallowers of the people". The two groups are similar but not identical. Both groups were ignoring the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:20, 29. The origin of the **Nicolaitan** sect was discussed last week. They were the followers of **Nicolaus** of Antioch who was one of the original seven deacons in Acts 6:7 who went apostate. They

were extremely licentious and did all they could to compromise with the culture. They wanted to bring in as much of the world as they possibly could.

Both groups did one thing; they compromised with the world system. Compromise in the church is a serious issue today in America. In fact, the church is a “called out” people. We’ve been called out of the world in order to be a distinct people of God in the world. We are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. Yet the modern church is doing all it can to accommodate the world. It is as if the church now has a new motto. Let’s show the world that we really aren’t that different.

### **Exhortation (2:16-17a)**

#### **Greek Text 2:16-17a**

**Translation 2:16-17a 'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. <sup>17</sup> 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

Verse 16-17a gives the exhortation in light of the condemnation. Their tolerance is way out of hand. They should not be putting up with the teachings and practices of the Balaamites or the Nicolaitans. Therefore, the church is exhorted to **repent**. **Repent** comes from the Greek word *metanoeo* (verb) or *metanoia* (noun). This word is perhaps the most misunderstood word in the entire Bible. Does it mean “to turn from sin”? Does it mean “to feel sorrow for sin”? Does it mean “to change one’s behavior”? The answer is an emphatic “NO”. It never means “to turn from sin”, it never means “to feel sorrow for sin”, it never means “to change your behavior”, it simply means to have “a change of mind”. “Sorrow may lead to repentance; sorrow may accompany repentance, but sorrow and repentance are two different things.”<sup>ii</sup> Of course a change of mind should result in a change of behavior but repentance looks only at the change of thinking not the resultant change of behavior. “Repentance is the root; change in behavior is the fruit. But the essence of repentance is the change of mind that must first take place. That is what these Christians from Pergamum are being called to do. They are supposed to think differently, have a different attitude toward the practices they are tolerating. This is the verb and it is an aorist imperative. The aorist implies hurriedness. Hurry up and **repent**, there is no time to waste.

If they don’t **repent**, Christ says, **I am coming to you quickly**. As in the first letter to Ephesus, **I am coming to you** stresses the imminence of Christ’s coming. It can happen at-any-moment. There is no doubt that this is the way a first century church would understand such a statement! Christ’s imminent coming is what is supposed to stimulate

them to **repent** without delay. Because Christ has delayed almost 2,000 years we have lost sight of this truth; the ever possible reality that He can return at-any-moment. The sense is this, “When I come quickly, I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth, if you shall not have repented before that coming, whenever it happens.”<sup>iii</sup>

Verse 16 is very interesting. Observe in v. 16 that Christ says I am coming to **you**. The **you** here is singular in the Greek and then He goes on to say **and I will make war against them**. **them** is a plural in the Greek. So, what this means is that the ones who are tolerating the Balaamites and Nicolaitans are to repent of their tolerance. If they don't then Christ is going to come and **make war against** the Balaamites and Nicolaitans. Notice also the imagery Christ draws on from His description in v. 12. He's going to **come and make war against them with the sword of His mouth**. Does Christ come and **make war with the sword of His mouth** against believers? Turn over to **Revelation 19:11-15**

<sup>11</sup> And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. <sup>12</sup> His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and on His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *on Him* which no one knows except Himself. <sup>13</sup> *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. <sup>14</sup> And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white *and* clean, were following Him on white horses. <sup>15</sup> From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty... <sup>21</sup> And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh.

Are these believers who Christ is making war against? No, they are unbelievers. Christ doesn't come and make war against believers, He comes and makes war against His enemies and He kills them with the sword which comes from His mouth. This demonstrates conclusively that when Christ says **I am coming to you quickly** He is referring to the imminent 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming. If the church at Pergamum does not repent of its tolerance before Christ's coming then it will mean that the Balaamites and Nicolaitans will have the dreadful consequences of the Tribulation judgments.

Finally, the last exhortation here is given in v. 17a. **'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches**. In other words, if you are a believer, if you can hear with understanding the things of the Spirit of God, hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to your church and not only your church but what the Spirit has to say to all **the churches**.

## Promise (2:17b)

### Greek Text 2:17b

**Translation 2:17b To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'**

The promise in 17b is for all who believe in Jesus Christ (1 John 5:4, 5). All who believe that Jesus is the Son of God are “overcomers” (cf. seven promises, particularly 2:11). Therefore, all genuine believers will receive the following promises. *First*, Christ **will give you some of the hidden manna** and *second* He will **give you a white stone with a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it**. Both of these are very difficult to decipher and there have been many interpretations. What I am giving you is what I find to be the two best interpretations.

*First*, the **hidden manna**. In the OT the Israelites ate manna during their forty year wanderings in the wilderness. In fact, they ate this bread during the Balaam incident mentioned earlier in this passage. Some of the manna was stored in the ark of the covenant (Heb 9:4) but according to tradition, the prophet Jeremiah hid the ark of the covenant before the destruction of Jerusalem in 605BC and the ark will not be recovered until Israel is restored in the future (cf. 2 Macc 2:5ff; Apoc Bar 7:7-9; 19:8). The true ark which is the archetype of the OT ark is located in heaven in the heavenly tabernacle (Rev 11:19; Heb 8:5; 9:24). The manna that is within that heavenly ark is the proper heavenly food for God’s people and we have the promise that we will eat of it in the future.

*Second*, the **white stone with a new name written on it which no one else knows**. The basis for this likely goes back to the Roman Empire. Citizens of the Roman Empire often received free gifts of admission to entertainment events. These free admission “tickets” were in exchange for white stones which would get them admitted to special events. At the special events a token was given to the victors which would get them into a special feast. Thus, the white stone is a personalized admission ticket that gives you access to the future Messianic feast in the Millennial Kingdom. A new name will be written on this stone, a new name of superior quality which is totally unique and reflects your status as a believer in Christ. It is a name which is absolutely peculiar to you; no one else will have or know your name.

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<sup>i</sup> For the goals of Humanism search for the “Humanist Manifesto” on a search engine.

<sup>ii</sup> Cocoris, G. Michael, *Grace Family Journal* (Duluth Bible Church), Fall 2004, 12.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas, Robert, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 196.

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