

PERGAMUM: HELL'S HEADQUARTERS
Rev 2:12-17 (24 February 2002)
Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road
Plymouth, Michigan 48170
Royce Dickinson, Jr.

It has often been said, with much truth, that Christians ought to live with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other hand. We need *both* to understand reality. The newspaper reports the visible events that are taking place in this world, but the Bible looks beyond to the invisible world where events taking place there affect what is taking place here. To fully understand reality, we must see what is happening in *both* worlds.

The Book of Revelation is a marvelous, yet mysterious, mixture of both worlds. And it is this intermingling of the two worlds that causes the book to be both a revelation and to be relevant. The heavenly Christ speaks to earthly Christians. The perspective of the hereafter provides perseverance for the here-and-now.

The devil has only two satanic strategies: intimidation and enticement. If he cannot make Christians buckle under tribulation, then he will try to break them with temptation. The church in ancient Pergamum was steadfast in the face of persecution, but it was seduced by false preaching and false practices. Before we read the risen Lord's message to this church in the second chapter of Revelation, let's briefly look at the city of Pergamum.

Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum were the three greatest cities in the province of Asia and they were rivals for power and prestige. Pergamum was located sixty-eight miles north of Smyrna and sixteen miles inland from the Aegean Sea, with an estimated population (in New Testament times) of 180,000. Pliny—a Roman writer and administrator (c. A.D. 61 – c. 113)—called Pergamum “by far the most distinguished city in Asia.” Built on a cone-shaped hill a thousand feet in height, the city dominated the surrounding valley of the Caicus River. Its very name in Greek—Πέργαμον (*Pergamon*)—means “citadel.” During the first half of the second century B.C. (under Eumenes II, 197-159 B.C.), Pergamum became “the finest flower” of Greek civilization. It boasted a library of more than 200,000 volumes. Legend has it that parchment was invented there when the supply of papyrus from Egypt was cut off. In 133 B.C., the Pergamene Empire was bequeathed (by Attalus III) to Rome.

The most spectacular aspect of the city was the upper terrace of the citadel with its sacred and royal buildings. Of these, the most remarkable was the great altar of Zeus that jutted out near the top of the mountain. Religion flourished in Pergamum. It was a center of worship for four of the most important pagan cults of the day—Zeus, Athene (the patron goddess), Dionysos, and Asklepios. Asklepios, who was designated “Savior” and whose symbol was the serpent, was the god of healing and was also known as “the Pergamene god.” The shrine of Asklepios attracted people from all over the world. Galen, one of the most famous physicians of the ancient world, was a native of Pergamum and studied there.

But the most significant aspect of Pergamum, for the Christians who made their homes there, was the fact that it was the official center in Asia for the worship of Caesar.

It was the first city of Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living ruler. In 29 B.C., Augustus granted permission for a temple to be erected in Pergamum to “the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma.” Of all the seven cities among which the Book of Revelation was intended to circulate, Pergamum was the one in which the church was most likely to clash with the imperial cult. With this in mind, let’s read Rev 2:12-17.

Rev 2:12¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

¹³“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. ¹⁵So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it” (NRSV).

Pergamum was the site of Satan’s throne. Many suggestions have been made to explain the phrase “where Satan’s throne is.” Some see an allusion to the thronelike altar to Zeus overlooking the city; others take the expression to refer to the cult of Asklepios or a more general reference to the fact that the city was a center of pagan worship; perhaps, say some, what is in mind is the seat of judgment used by Roman magistrates; and then it has been pointed out that as a traveler approached Pergamum by the ancient road from the south, the actual shape of the city-hill would appear as a giant throne towering above the plain. While there is a degree of truth in all of these suggestions, I think the phrase “where Satan’s throne is” is best understood in connection with the prominence of Pergamum as the official cult center of emperor worship in Asia. As Rome had become the center of Satan’s activity in the West (cf. 13:2; 16:10), so Pergamum had become his “throne” in the East.

As many of you no-doubt know, there is a Hell, Michigan. As a youngster growing up in Michigan, I thought it would be hilarious to attend church there: to go to church in Hell. I still recall one of the bumper stickers sold there. It said, “I’ve been to Hell and back.” Well, you can imagine the humor that is possible when one lives in a town with the name Hell. But for the Pergamene Christians, there was no humor in their situation; only hostility. They found themselves living in Hell’s Headquarters. And one among them, Antipas, had been put to death for his faith.

One version of the Christian hymn *Just As I Am* speaks of “fears within and foes without.” The situation for the Pergamene Christians is best described by reversing these lyrics. Their problem was fears without and foes within! The “Balaamites” and the “Nicolaitans” were almost certainly not two groups, but one. The word “Nicolaitans” may be a nickname based on what *may* be the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name “Balaam.”

In the Old Testament, Balaam was a pagan prophet hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to pronounce a curse upon the invading Israelites. God prevented Balaam from pronouncing a curse and caused him to proclaim a blessing on Israel (Num 22:5-24:25). So, Balaam devised a plan whereby Israel would indeed be cursed. Balaam advised the Moabite women to entice the Israelite men to indulge in sexual immorality with them, and then the women were successful in getting the men to worship the Moabite gods and participate in the sacred meals (Num 25:1-3; 31:16). The seductive scheme worked all too well, and God punished the Israelites for their involvement in idolatry. Balaam became the paradigm of all false teachers who, for personal gain, betray believers into fatal compromise which leads to unfaithfulness to God. “What happened to Balaam?” you ask. He was with the kings of Midian when he was killed by the Israelites (Num 31:8; Josh 13:21-22) because he had returned to collect his reward for offering counsel against Israel (b. Sanhedrin 106a; Midrash Rabbah Num 20:20; 22:5). The prophet who preached compromise perished by the sword. And to the first-century “Balaamites” in Pergamum, the One who held the sharp two-edged sword (v. 12) warned that He would come soon and make war against them with the sword of His mouth (v. 16).

It is worth noting that the fault of Pergamum was the opposite of Ephesus. At Ephesus, the heretics had been rooted out but love was missing. At Pergamum, and as we will see at Thyatira as well, there was an indifference to the presence of heretics. The Ephesians were commended for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans, while some Pergamenes were condemned for holding to the preaching of the Nicolaitans. *The Nicolaitans, in the spirit of Balaam, were prophet-teachers who were advocating compromise with Roman society and Roman religion in order to gain social acceptance and to avoid religious persecution.* And let’s be honest, this teaching is still tempting today. Those of us who claim Jesus Christ is Lord must ever be vigilant and vigorous in influencing the world around us, rather than allowing the world around us to shape our beliefs and our behaviors. But beware! In our vigilance and vigor we must always be loving. We must not be like Ephesus and compromise the very spirit of Christianity. And we must not be like Pergamum and compromise the very soundness of Christianity. At loveless Ephesus, it was “as cold as Hell.” At compromising Pergamum, “all Hell had broken loose.”

To those at Pergamum who remained faithful, Christ promised “hidden manna” and a “white stone with a new name written on it.” According to Jewish tradition, the pot of manna that was placed in the ark of the covenant (Exod 16:32-34; cf. Heb 9:4) was taken by Jeremiah at the time of the destruction of Solomon’s temple (sixth century B.C.) and hidden underground in Mt. Nebo (2 Macc 2:4-7). There it was to remain until the coming of the Messiah when Jeremiah would reappear and return the ark and its contents to the new messianic temple in Jerusalem. Whatever may be the background for this promise, one thing is crystal clear: *the promised manna stands in stark contrast with the idolatrous food for which the false teachers seem prepared to compromise their future reward.* The choice was straightforward: feast with Caesar or feast with Christ.

There are perhaps a dozen or more plausible interpretations of the “white stone.” It seems likely that no single explanation is adequate because the Apostle John deliberately alludes to a diverse background. With that in mind, *I would suggest that a possible prevailing concept is that the white stone is a token (Latin: tessera)—or, as we would say, a ticket—for admission to the messianic banquet of Jesus Christ.* The nature of the “new

name” written on the white stone is not so easy to determine. Is this the new name of Christ—as in Rev 3:12—or of the individual Christian? I tend to agree with those who see a reference to Isa 56:5 and especially 62:2, which promises that God will give His people a new name: a new name appropriate for the new Jerusalem and the new creation (Isa 65:15-19). *The new name is the Christian’s name and it symbolizes a new identity, a new status, and a new life.*

In the United States, we do not confront emperor worship per se, but we certainly have celebrities who receive more attention and more adoration than many people give to God. These celebrities, more often than not, represent a way of life that is not compatible with Christianity. And so the temptation to compromise is ever before us. We need to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

I must confess, there are a host of illustrious and impressive worldly events to which I wish someone would give me a ticket. But there is one ticket I want more than any other: a ticket with my name on it for admission to the banquet feast of the Lamb of God in the New Jerusalem. The cost for such a ticket? . . . my life. That is the price paid by the host, Jesus Christ, and that is the price that you and I must pay as well. Are we willing to pay the price?

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