

THE CHURCH THAT DWELT WITH SATAN

Revelation 2:12-17

This brief but important epistle to the church at Pergamum reminds us that our Lord possesses an intimate knowledge of the conditions and doing of every church. In view of this fact, let us note some of the outstanding features of this paragraph from God's Word.

I. The City.

The illustrious city of Pergamum was built on a lofty hill in the Caicus Valley, some fifty-five miles northeast of Smyrna. It held a prominent place in the ancient world. It had been a capital city for more than three hundred years when this letter was written. In addition to having the atmosphere of an ancient capital city, it had behind it the pride of centuries of greatness. A capital city has an air and atmosphere all its own. I have observed that Washington, London, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Santiago and Lima have certain traits which only a capital city can have.

Pergamum was insignificant commercially, but it was a great political, educational and religious center. The Roman proconsul lived there at the time this letter was written. Pergamum boasted of her great library of 200,000 volumes, which was second only to the one in Alexandria. That was an immense number for an age in which every book had to be written and copied by hand. Pergamum was noted also as a great center of idolatry. Heathen gods were worshiped there. Temples to Jupiter, Minerva, Apollo, Venus, Bacchus and Aesculapius adorned the city.

Aesculapius, the god of healing, was the patron deity. His emblem was the serpent. On many of the coins in the city his image appeared with a rod encircled by a serpent. His priests performed charms and incantations. Great crowds resorted to his temple where it was claimed falsely that miracles of healing were performed. With his worship the worst forms of licentious indulgence were associated.

Pergamum was the first city in Asia with a temple for the worship of Caesar. It was a center of emperor worship. State support of religion enabled the government to demand allegiance to the state religion, to require the worship of Caesar and to deny the freedom of religious worship. Due to those circumstances, it is not surprising that the city was referred to as the place where Satan dwelt and had his headquarters. From his throne there he sought to strangle Christianity in that part of the world.

Distinguished as it was for its idolatry, its learning, its medical science and its licentiousness, the city was, from a Christian standpoint, one of the worst of the seven which are named in these chapters.

II. The Christ.

This text presents our Lord as "He which hath the sharp sword with two edges." He is shown as ready to use His sword which proceeds "out of his mouth." The symbolism is clear: This is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). It indicates the keen and piercing quality of God's Word. "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 discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

This twoedged sword is clearly the Word of God. Christ is ever ready to use this defensive and offensive weapon which proceeds "out of his mouth." Having two edges, Christ's sword defends the righteous and smites the unrighteous. It never bends nor

blunts, and it has won marvelous victories. It cuts to the central roots of error. It destroys evil thoughts, wrong desires and wicked resolutions. Christ wants every one of His churches to understand that He will test the actions of every one of its members by the Word of God.

III. The Church.

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write." We do not have an account of the origin of this church. It is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Church history is practically silent with reference to it. Nevertheless, it was always under the view of Christ and responsible to Him.

Christ assured the members of this church that their environment was well known to Him. No fair estimate of any life can be made unless environment is taken into account. We know, of course, that environment can be overstressed, and that it can be made an excuse for weakness and failure, but, making allowance for all this, environment has much to do with the shaping of character. It is not all the truth, but there is truth in the observation that we are what we are because we are where we are.

The church in Pergamum was surrounded by dangers. It was in the metropolis of heathen divinity. There paganism reigned supreme and licentious worship was observed. The fidelity to the faith, on the part of the church members, proves that it is possible for people to be obedient Christians anywhere. Christianity is not a matter of locality, but of character. It consists in the loyalty of the heart and the allegiance of the life to Christ, and these may be maintained anywhere. Since it is possible to be a Christian anywhere, then we ought not to excuse ourselves for our lack of Christianity by pleading the force of circumstances, the nature of our business or the character of the place in which we live. Frequently we hear somebody saying, "It is no use for me to try to be a Christian where I am," or "I am sorry, but under the present circumstances I cannot keep from doing thus and so." It is never necessary to do wrong.

It is harder to be a Christian in some places than in others. Some places and circumstances are more favorable for the development of Christian character than others. The Lord knows this and will estimate our work in the light of our opportunities. He said, "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is." You observe the works are estimated by the locality. We may be sure, therefore, that, if we are in hard places, He will give us grace according to our needs and strength according to our days. He will never fail us or forsake us. The greater our difficulties in living the Christian life the nobler will be our reward.

IV. The Commendation.

Christ sees and appreciates every good thing that is done for His sake. There were some things in that church which He commended very highly. He said, "I know thy works." The members of that church were not idle, but worked even in unfavorable surroundings where Satan lived and reigned. They had two qualities which were especially praiseworthy, and Christ commended them very highly.

1. Their loyalty to His Person.

"Thou holdest fast my name." His name represents the fulness of His divine person and saving work. It signifies Who He is and what He has done. They stood firm for the great essential truths which His name signifies. His name was worthy of their supreme love and devotion. They were not afraid to honor His name, but rather gloried in it. They held fast to the name of Christ, and so should we.

2. Their loyalty to His Faith.

"And hast not denied my faith." Even though they had been tested in the most appalling ways, such as the confiscation of their possessions and subjection to physical torture, they refused to deny the faith of Christ. They remained staunch and true. They refused to deny the essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

There are many churches in our land today of whom our Lord cannot bear this testimony. Many of them are silent concerning the great historic facts of the Christian faith. Others actually deny the virgin birth, the miraculous works, the atoning death, the bodily resurrection, the personal intercession and the second coming of Christ. Our Lord is deeply concerned about the preservation and propagation of these glorious truths.

Of that early church our Lord said, "You are a working church; you are true to the name of Christ; you are loyal to My faith." Would that He could say as much of our church, and of every other church!

Christ introduced a name here saying, "even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." Even in his satanic environment, this believer in Christ lived a true and beautiful Christian life. Thus he proved that a Christian life can reveal its beauty and shed its fragrance under every condition. He was a real Christian in the city where Satan dwelt and reigned. Perhaps more Christians are laughed and ridiculed out of doing their Christian duties than are frightened out of doing so by physical persecution. Antipas remained loyal to Christ in spite of persecution.

Seized by the Roman soldiers, who were under the command of a centurion, Antipas was charged with being a Christian, and therefore a rebel against Caesar. When arraigned before the officer in charge, he was admonished to renounce Christ, burn incense on the altar and bow before the image of Caesar. When he refused to do so, the order was given for him to be thrown to the lions.

Antipas was then led to the center of the arena, which all the attendants vacated. A sliding door was raised from one of the subterranean cages at the lower end of the arena, and two hungry lions rushed forth. Soon it was all over. The hooting mob dispersed to their homes. In the midst of the arena were just a few bones and a torn, bloodstained robe. The murderers thought, "We are done with that pestilential fellow; we have silenced his tongue; we have put an end to his witnessing; we shall not hear any more of him. We can now go home and sleep in peace for a dead man does not tell any tales."

Are you sure about that? Did you never read, "He being dead yet speaketh?" The lisping tongue often becomes eloquent after death, and the one dead man mightier than a whole battalion of living ones. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." About nineteen centuries have gone by and Pergamum is still pilloried before the world because of the murder of that saintly man. It cannot get rid of those blood stains. Forever they will remain upon that city's charter as an indelible disgrace.

In a single sentence Christ immortalized him as "Antipas My faithful martyr." This God-fearing and unflinching man deemed it better to be a dead hero than a living coward. His name still lives because he bore his testimony and witnessed for Christ by living the life of a saint and dying the death of a martyr. He thus caused his name to be honored on earth and in heaven. Did Antipas regret his loyalty to Christ? A thousand times, "No!"

V. The Complaint.

"But I have a few things against thee." Thus the tone of the letter changes. The praise stops and the rebuke begins. The charges were few in number, but not unimportant. What were their faults about which Christ complained?

1. Balaamism.

The phrase, "the doctrine of Balaam" reminds us of the familiar story of the disobedient prophet of the Old Testament. Balaam wanted to curse Israel in order to get the honors and the gifts of the king of Moab. Baffled in this desire and prohibited by God from cursing Israel, Balaam taught the king of Moab how to corrupt Israel. He taught the king of Moab to corrupt the men of Israel by leading them into idolatry and immorality. As MacLaren said, "Balaam tried to get the best of both worlds, so he ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds." He wanted to be true to God and at the same time rake off some dividends on the side. He tried to stand in with God and at the same time collect a reward from the ungodly. He was anxious to die the death of the righteous, but was not willing to live a righteous life.

In the church at Pergamum the doctrine of Balaam was simply Satan's scheme to corrupt the lives of God's children in such a manner as to ruin their testimony and bring His righteous judgments upon them. It was the teaching that so long as a person is orthodox in belief it is all right for him to live in worldliness and carnality. There were some who held that one could be a Christian and live like the world. There has never been a time when there were as many Balaamites in the churches as today. We call them "worldly Christians." Billy Sunday used to say, "You might as well talk about a heavenly devil." Christian people do not live any old way. The Lord's sheep hear His voice and follow Him.

2. Nicolaitanism.

Dr. B. H. Carroll said that the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes was this: "If you are a Christian, it doesn't make any difference what you do." Such doctrine was hateful to Christ and injurious to the church.

Christ censured this church for tolerating these persons of false creed and foul conduct. He was grieved that the members of this church lacked the courage to expel those who were injurious to the cause of Christ.

VI. The Correction.

Christ called for the correction of these faults in the church. He wanted the corrupt ones to turn from the wrong to the right. He wanted the true Christians to be sorry for their failure to do their duty by expelling those who held false doctrines and indulged in wicked practices. Our Lord said, "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." Either the church had to deal with the guilty parties or He would bring judgment upon the church. Unless discipline was practiced immediately, judgment would be swift and heavy.

VII. The Compensation.

Christ said, "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." In these gracious and encouraging words Christ promised the conquerors two blessings.

1. The choicest nourishment.

The hidden manna is better food than the world can give. It is "hidden" in the sense that it is unknown to the unsaved. It is comprehensible only through personal experience. Food fulfils two functions -- it satisfies and strengthens.

2. The highest distinction.

"I will give him a white stone, and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth it." In courts of justice white pebbles were used for acquitting and black ones for condemning. The Christian has the knowledge that comes through a glorious experience with Christ. Do you have that precious knowledge?