

THE CHURCH THAT DWELT WITH SATAN

Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamum, the city which is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, holds a prominent place in ancient history. It was an illustrious city, the capital of Mysia. It was recognized as one of the finest cities of Proconsular Asia. Unlike Ephesus and Smyrna it was not a center of commerce, although it was located on a river. The population never numbered more than 30,000, and is now less than half that number. Politically, architecturally, and educationally, Pergamum was preeminent. It was far more of a professional than a commercial city. It contained a magnificent library of over 200,000 volumes, and like Alexandria, its literary treasures were ultimately destroyed.

Long before the Christian era it was a celebrated city. It was the residence of the noted kings of the family of Attalus. The Roman Proconsul resided there. Temples to Jupiter, Minerva, Apollo, Venus, and Bacchus adorned the city. The city was noted for its idolatry. Aesculapius, the god of medicine, was the patron deity. He was worshipped in the form of a serpent and the worship degenerated into corruption. The state supported this heathen religion and punished with death those who refused to render allegiance to it. Antipas, the pastor of the church at Pergamum, was executed for refusing to subscribe to the established religion. Pergamum has been described as a "sort of union of the pagan cathedral city, a university town, and a royal residence."

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

I. The Christ.

Our scripture lesson identifies the Author of this Message as, "He which hath the sharp sword with two edges." (ver. 12-b). The Author of this epistle was none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. He is shown as ready to use His sword which proceeds "out of His mouth." A sword was the symbol of discerning and executive power. This description of Christ revealed that He had authority to perform the business He had in hand. What was this business?

1. To pass judgment on the condition of the church.

Christ alone had and has this power. He judges individuals as well as the whole church. His searching eye is ever upon us.

2. To penetrate into the deepest recesses of human nature.

No eyes were ever able to see as much as Christ could see and does see.

3. To make the keenest discrimination.

Things may be mixed up, but Christ can separate them. He readily recognizes the differences between true and pretentious Christians.

4. To protect His Cause and His followers from all foes.

Those who are on His side need never fear defeat. The sword He wields

never bends nor blunts, and it has won marvelous victories. Having two edges His sword defends the righteous and smites the unrighteous.

This description shows Christ 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). The sword, as a symbol of God's Word, indicates its keen and piercing quality. "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged 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." (Heb. 4:12). It destroys wrong thoughts and wicked resolutions. The church at Pergamum needed to be warned that it had to do with One who would test its actions by the Word of God. Christ saw His churches as they were, and told them what was wrong and what they needed. He moved in heaven among the golden candlesticks and saw from heaven what was going on in His churches on earth. He still walks in the midst of the candlesticks and watches His churches on earth.

II. The Church.

"And to the angel of the Church in Pergamum, write". Revelation 2:12a. We have no account of the origin of this church. Here is the only instance of its being mentioned in the Scriptures. Church history is almost silent with regard to it. It is supposed, by some that Paul visited it, but this is mere conjecture; nevertheless it was always under the eye of Christ and responsible to Him.

The church in Pergamum was located in the place of peril, in surroundings of danger. It was in the metropolis of heathen divinity. There paganism reigned supreme and licentious worship was observed. One of the pastors of the church was slain for his fidelity to the faith and danger awaited the members who were strong in conviction and loyal in devotion.

III. The Commendation.

Christ saw what was going on in the church in Pergamum. Not all was bad in that church. To some things He gave His hearty commendation. He said, "I know thy works." It was not an idle church. It worked even in unfavorable surroundings. It worked where "Satan's seat" was. How encouraging it is to know that the Lord Jesus sees and appreciates every good thing done for His sake. The commendation lies in this, that the position of Christians in that pagan city was one of unusual difficulty and trial. What were some of the things for which Christ commended this church?

1. For their loyalty to His Person.

"Thou holdest fast My name." Consider the significance of His name. The Lord Jesus Christ. Lord is His divine name, the Jehovah of the Old Testament, the name of deity, of God in the flesh, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus is His human name, His title as God in the flesh. It speaks of the incarnation, but the Christ became man in order to be our Redeemer. "Thou shalt call His name Jesus; for He shall save His people from their sins." Matt. 1:21. Christ, the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, means "The Anointed One". When He states that the church at Pergamum held fast His name, the Lord meant that they had stood firm for the great essential truths which His name signifies. They were not ashamed of Christ and not

afraid to honor His name.

- (1) His name is worthy of our supreme love and devotion.

In Christ the Christian finds that rest and sweetness that fully satisfies the soul.

- (2) Life's grandest purpose is reached through His name.

To be God-like is the grandest aim that can animate a soul, and Christ only makes it realizable.

- (3) There is all the help that heaven can give within easy reach.

God promises help to His own in every time of need.

2. For their loyalty to His faith.

"And hast not denied my faith." Thus He commended their fidelity to His faith. This church had not only actively held the great truths related to the Person and work of Christ, but it had not denied the essential doctrines of the Christian faith described by our Lord as "my faith." How many churches are there in our land today by which such testimony could not be borne. Many churches are silent concerning these great historic facts of the Christian faith, while others actually deny the virgin birth, the miraculous works, the atoning death, the bodily resurrection, and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

This letter suggests some very interesting things about Christians:--

- (1) That they may reside in very bad places.

Pergamum was a very wicked place, the very hot-bed of iniquity. It was noted for its low life even in years before the Christian era. Its wickedness grew. It became the capital of Satan's empire, and his throne was there. Yet, Christians were found there. A Christian will give up a wrong occupation, but he does not have to leave a place if his employment has the approval of Christ. He may stay where he is and show the real change that Christianity makes in a man. Christ needs Christians in the midst of the wicked. Do not judge men by the places from which they come, but by what they are in themselves, as well as by what they do.

- (2) That if they reside in wicked places, they are greatly exposed to temptations to deny Christ.

- (3) That all temptations to deny Christ may be resisted, and His name held with unyielding tenacity.

- (4) Christ takes a great interest in those who are faithful to Him. He had His eyes on His followers and knew all about them.

A. He knew their works, He knew the business in which they were engaged and their efforts to serve Him.

B. He knew where they lived. He knew the character of their community,

and all of the temptations to which they were exposed.

- C. He knew their faithfulness to His name. He realized what they had to contend with in order to be faithful, but, after all, there is no excuse for unfaithfulness to Christ.

IV. The Complaint. Revelation 2:14-

"But I have a few things against thee." The charges were few in number, but not unimportant. What were these 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 (Numbers 22-24). Balaam wanted to curse Israel 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. The two sins by which he taught the king of Moab to corrupt Israel were idolatry and fornication. The doctrine of Balaam was this: "Lead them into idolatry and immorality." His plan to seduce the men of Israel, thus making them obnoxious and useless to God, so far succeeded that a terrible judgment came upon the nation -- a judgment that was stayed only by the faithfulness of Phinehas, the priest.

Balaamism does not come right out and curse the church. It takes the more subtle way of corrupting the church by compromise with sin. It encourages partnership with worldliness and wickedness. In the church, the doctrine of Balaam is 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. In other words, it is the teaching that so long as a person is orthodox in belief, it is all right for him to live in worldliness and carnality. We are saved "by grace...through faith" plus nothing, yet the clear teaching of the Word is that we are saved "unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." The two points of testing for a clean animal in the Old Testament dietary regulations were that the hoof and the mouth, so to speak, agree. Thus in the true Christian the "foot" --walk, or manner of life -- is to agree with the "mouth"--the profession.

2. Nicolaitanism.

This doctrine, which we considered in the sermon on "The Church That Left Her First Love" was hated by Christ and was hurtful to the church. It encouraged Christians to take liberties with the gospel of grace.

Christ complained that this church tolerated persons of false creed and of foul conduct. This church was strong in attachment to Christ, but lacking in courage to expel those who were injurious to it. One of the greatest reasons for the present-day spiritual dearth is the false doctrine and unchristian practices.

V. The Correction. Revelation 2:16.

Christ called for the correction of these faults in the church at Pergamum. He advocated repentance. On the part of the true Christians in the church,

His exhortation implied their being sorry for their failure to do their Christian duty by expelling those who held false doctrines and indulged in wicked practices. So far as the corrupt ones in the church were concerned, He wanted them to turn from the wrong to the right.

Christ uttered an alarming threat. He said in substance, "Repent or else," "Repent or have a fight," "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 else Christ would take a hand in bringing judgment on the church. It was a warning that Christ would come, and by exercise of righteous judgment, and remove what the church refused to remove. Unless discipline was practiced immediately, judgment would be swift and heavy.

VI. The Compensation. Revelation 2:17.

A precious promise is given to the "overcomer," the one heeding the warning of Christ and through His power separating himself from the sins the Lord condemns. In His gracious words of encouragement, Christ promised the conquerors two blessings.

1. The choicest nourishment.

"The hidden manna." This is an allusion to the manna that fell in the wilderness. This manna was divinely supplied, humanly gathered, fresh every morning, supplied in a double portion on the sixth day, furnished through the wilderness journey, and was ample to feed all the people. Food fulfils two functions -- it satisfies and strengthens. It is "hidden" in the sense that it is unknown to the unconverted and comprehensible only through personal experience.

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 ancient times a white stone was used for four purposes:---

- (1) To pronounce acquittal on one accused and tried.
- (2) To evidence that the holder was made a free man in a free city-state.
- (3) To bind a friendship between two who were separated by distance.
- (4) To designate the victor in the Olympic games.

Justification, adoption, preservation, and triumph were symbolized by it. "A new name written which no one knows but he that receiveth it," is a figurative way of saying that the Christian's experience is a thing entirely between the soul and the Saviour, and in its deepest sensations incommunicable to any other. The Christian has the knowledge that comes through a glorious experience.