

Revelation 2:12-17 Pergamum

On the morning of December 16th 1944, Nazi forces launched an audacious counter-offensive in the freezing Ardennes Forest in southern Belgium and Luxembourg. American defenders were caught unprepared as more than 250,000 German troops and tanks poured across the lines. The attack was so successful that a 60 mile front, known as the bulge, plunged deep into Allied territory trapping many American troops behind enemy lines. Nearly a month later, it was a lack of reinforcements and fuel and the brought the Germans to a halt.

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to be caught behind enemy lines? In a very real sense, as Christians, we are. We should see the church as a forward operating base set up in enemy occupied territory. Jesus tells us in Jn. 15:19, “*You are not of the world,*” and Paul declares in Php. 3:20 “*our citizenship is in heaven.*” 1 John 5:19 tells us that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.¹

This is something the church in Pergamum understood very well. If there was a place that a church could be described as living behind enemy lines, it was Pergamum.

Pergamum was an ancient city, even 2,000 years ago. but rose to prominence when it allied itself with Rome early in her rise to power. Thus Pergamum became the provincial capital of Asia. By the 1st Century, it was also a notorious party town. It was Washington D.C. and Las Vegas all rolled into one. You can imagine the sleaze and corruption that lurked in every shadow. It was a cesspool of hedonism that stopped at nothing in search of pleasure and fulfillment. The pressure to compromise was intense.

Who Jesus Is to His Church

12 To this church living behind enemy lines, Jesus shows himself as the one ***who has the sharp two-edged sword***. In Revelation 1, the sword is pictured as coming from the mouth of Jesus. It’s a graphic depiction of the word of God. Ephesians 6:17 says the word of God the sword of the Spirit. Hebrews 4:12 describes God’s word as a sword of judgement:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

To the Christians in Pergamum, Jesus is saying my sword matters more than the sword held by Rome. James Hamilton Jr. says the key question is, “Whose judgment do you fear?”ⁱⁱ Do you fear the judgement of the world or of Jesus? John’s readers could avoid the sword of Rome by doing the things that put them in danger of the sword of Jesus. Every one of us will face situations where what the world judges to be right contradicts what Jesus judges to be right. Whose sword do you respect in that moment? It’s not the judgment of the world that ultimately matters. It is the judgement of your Lord and Savior that matters. It is his word that matters.

Jesus Knows His Church

13 As he does every church, Jesus intimately knows his church. He says, *I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is*. They were a church behind enemy lines. These believers are living in the heart of darkness, but what exactly does Jesus mean by Satan’s throne?

First, it is where Rome had its throne in Asia. Much of Revelation was prophetic proclamation against Rome and the worldly system she represents. Just as the church is to function as Jesus’ hands and feet, Rome served as the hands and feet of Satan. Pergamum was the seat of power for Rome.

Christians were not persecuted for worshipping Jesus. Rome had no problem if someone wanted to worship Jesus. Christians were persecuted because they refused to worship the emperor. Not only was this seen as unpatriotic and treasonous, but irreligious as well. The charge often leveled against Christians was atheism.

The world is content to let us have Jesus, so long as we are willing to bow our knee to their idols. For these 1st Century believers it was a literal idol of the emperor. During the 30s and 40s German churches were left alone as long as they gave due reverence to the Führer and the Nazi Reich. Communist China allows official state churches as long as they toe the party line.

For North American Christians, the pressure may be more subtle, for now. Most don’t mind that we worship Jesus. It’s when we refuse to bow at their sacred altars of gay rights, abortion, a blind, self-serving form of patriotism or nationalism, radical environmentalism, corporate

profits, or whatever other cause is deemed as sacrosanct. Satan and the world don't mind a church that capitulates to their goals and values. But if we truly follow Jesus, then we realize that only He can be Lord. Only He can sit on the throne.

In addition to Pergamum being the seat of power for Rome, there was also a temple in honor of Zeus, who was regarded as the king of all the gods in the Greco-Roman pantheon. His temple was huge platform built on a mountain, and on this platform was a literal throne for Zeus. Since all idol-worship is really Satan worship, Jesus may have been referring to the throne of Zeus.

From a spiritual perspective, Satan is merely an angel. He is not bound by a physical body like we are, but he is not omnipresent like God. He can't be everywhere at once. He has to set up shop somewhere. Maybe for these very reasons, he had set up headquarters in Pergamum. I don't know. If Satan has a headquarters somewhere on earth today where do you suppose it is? Washington D.C.? Hollywood? New York City? Mecca? Baghdad? Mumbai? Karachi? Jerusalem? Moscow? Where do you think he would set up shop and why?

The Good News

In spite of these challenges, Jesus commends them for their faith. Satan uses two primary weapons in his war against the church—persecution and seduction. He uses a carrot and a stick. The church in Pergamum was doing a good job of resisting the stick. Jesus says, ***you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith.*** Under the very eye of Rome, under the very shadow of the throne for Zeus, there is a group of faithful believers. They cling tenaciously to their faith in Christ and would not let go. Jesus even mentions ***Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you.*** Apparently, Antipas was the first to give their lives for their faith.

The Bad News

14 But persecution isn't Satan's only weapon. He says in verse 14, ***I have a few things against you.*** The church in Pergamum was resisting the stick, but giving in to the carrot. Instead of denying Jesus all at once, they are compromising him one little piece at a time. They are doing this in two ways.

First, is the moral compromise. Jesus says, ***you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.*** This refers to the Old Testament prophet of Balaam and a tragic incident recorded in Numbers 22-24, 31.

For the sake of time, I can't go through the whole story here. Balaam was a prophet whom Israel's enemy, Balak, king of Moab tries to buy off to curse Israel. However, every time Balaam opens his mouth, instead of curses, God makes him offer blessings. No matter what Balak did, he couldn't get Balaam to curse Israel. But Balaam was afraid of losing his big paydayⁱⁱⁱ, so he tells Balak how he could get Israel to curse themselves. All he had to do was seduce them with sexual sin.

And so Moabite women were sent into the Israelite camp and seduced the men and enticed them to offer sacrifices to Baal. God's judgement was swift and severe. 24,000 Israelites died as a result of their unfaithfulness. It all started with moral compromise. Though the Christians in Pergamum were not denying Jesus, they were succumbing to the sexual sin and moral compromise that surrounded them. They let their culture define their morality.

I can't help but think that if Jesus were writing to the North American church, he would say much the same thing. We go to church on Sundays. We read our Bibles and listen to Christian radio, and we sin sexually. According to a survey by the Barna Group, 77% of Christian men between 18 and 30 view pornography at least monthly.^{iv} I don't just want to pick on the men here. Christian women are voracious readers of romance literature which is often little more than smut in written form. How many Christian women read the *Fifty Shades of Grey* and bought tickets to the movie and saw nothing wrong with it. Is it any wonder that 26% of us have been involved in extramarital affairs? The divorce rate is not higher in the church than in the world. For Christian teens and millennials the ideas of saving sex until marriage and not living together before marriage are not even on the table. It's just assumed that's what you do. We have been seduced by the culture around us.

15 Tied together with this moral compromise is doctrinal compromise. False teaching and false practice always go hand in hand. If you change what you do then you have to

change what you believe and teach. It wasn't just that they were giving in to sexual immorality. That moral compromise was rooted in a particular teaching. He calls it the teaching of Balaam. They were teaching things that excused, justified and rationalized their sin. Do you suppose they said things like "times have changed. This is how things are now. We need to be more loving and accepting." In verse 15 Jesus also says they ***have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans***. These Nicolaitans are mentioned in two of Jesus' letters. We know next to nothing about them, but the bottom line is that they were some form of false teaching.

The contemporary American church emphasizes style over substance. Doctrine and teaching have fallen on hard times. Many want 45 minute song services and 10 minute sermonettes, but we neglect the substance of our teaching to our own peril. What we believe and the teaching we listen to matters and it matter eternally. As pastor here at Son-Rise I want you to know the word God will always have a high central place in my teaching.

Call to Action

16 Pergamum's moral and spiritual compromise leads Jesus to call them to ***repent***. They are to stop their compromise and turn back toward God. Repentance is not a one-time act, something you only do when you come to faith in Jesus. There are times throughout our Christian life where we need correction or growth that requires continued repentance.

This is not a mere suggestion or good advice. Jesus threatens ***if not, I will come to you soon and war against you with the sword of my mouth***. The piercing, cutting word of God will come against them if they do not repent. This is severe imagery our Savior uses. The sharp edge of God's word can be used like a surgeons' scalpel to heal and save, but it can also be used like a soldier's sword to attack. This is the soldier's sword we see here. Jesus will come to do battle against his own church, if they are not faithful. They are making themselves enemies of Christ. Jesus does not tell Pergamum how he might bring his sword to bear against them. He might remove their lampstand from his presence as he threatened with Ephesus. He might allow some other tribulation to befall them as Jesus warns the next church in Thyatira. He could even use Rome's sword against them as punishment.

Jesus' Promise

17 And so Jesus calls them to have ears that listen, and he makes two promises ***To the one who conquers***. The conqueror is the one who both remains faithful to the name of Jesus and resists compromise with the world.

Our Lord's first promise is to ***give some of the hidden manna***. Manna was the food God gave to the children of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land (Ex.16:32-34). It appeared with the dew in the night. The flake-like food was gathered in the morning and could be ground and baked into cakes that tasted like wafers made with honey (Num. 11:8; Ex. 16:31). This speaks both the provision and care of God.

But what is the hidden manna? The only hidden manna we know of was a sample of the manna preserved inside the Ark of the Covenant (Heb. 9:4).

The Ark represented the very presence of God in the most holy place in the tabernacle and then the temple. It was an inner chamber where the ark was kept and it was to be the focal point of God's presence on earth. No one was allowed to touch the Ark or access the Ark (Ex. 25:14-15; Num. 4:15). Only the high priest could enter the most holy place, and only on one day a year. He would sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice on the ark to pay for the sins of the people, but he wasn't allowed to touch the ark, or open it. (Lev. 16:11-17). The average Israelite was never even allowed to see the Ark, let alone touch anything inside it.

Though bloated with all the typical Hollywood embellishments, the final scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* does a good job portraying the sacred otherness of the Ark. The Ark simply was not meant for sinful people. You don't just nonchalantly open the Ark. You don't just waltz into the presence of God like your walking into the convenience store and getting a pack of gum.

To access inside the Ark, to partake of the manna hidden inside, is a promise for these Christians to be in the very presence of God. For a thousand years, no Jew would ever presume to look inside the Ark, but in Christ, our promise is to have the most intimate access to God.

Secondly, Jesus promises to ***give him a white stone***. This sounds very cryptic to our modern ears, and there has been a lot of speculation about what it means.

Some scholars say it was a mark of citizenship. White stones were also used as tickets to certain events. Like trophies, they were given out to victors in athletic events with the name of the event inscribed upon it. In certain courts, a dark stone was used to indicate guilt, while a white stone indicated innocence.^v All of these provide interesting historical and cultural references. Which one, if any, is correct is uncertain. They all speak to the victory and salvation we have in Jesus, and the citizenship we have in the new Jerusalem.

Written upon the stone is a **new name**. Like much of Revelation this draws upon the Old Testament. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises a new name for his people (Is. 62:1-5). A new name means a new identity. In the ancient Near East your name was closely associated with your identity. Your name was not just a label. It was a biography and great care was exercised in choosing a name. In the Bible, names were sometimes changed later in life to recognize a new calling or identity. Jacob became Israel (Gen. 32:28). Jesus calls Peter a rock (Mt. 16:18). Saul is renamed Paul (Ac. 13:9).

Even today we want our own identity; to be special in some way. We choose our clothing, our cars, our music and so much more based on what identity we want to have. Though we don't put the same emphasis on names as those in John's day, we still give great thought to the names we give our children, believing that name will affect their identity in some way. You don't see too many boys named Benedict, Adolf, or Judas. I've never known a girl named Jezebel, although, I have known a cat with that name. It was every bit appropriate for that feline beast. There is now a Swiss company that will find you a globally unique name for your baby for only \$35,000. This includes not only a unique name, but they also promise that it will fit with your family story, that it won't be offensive in any language, and they will even create a positive story and mythology behind the name.^{vi}

A new name is the promise of a new identity in Christ **that no one knows except the one who receives it**. This white stone isn't a generic card from Hallmark with some flowery quote, but it is something very personal for you. It is between you and your Lord and Savior. He has a new name for you; a new identity. You won't be defined by your past, or your failures, or your inadequacies, or your fears.

We can only imagine what these new names and new identities might be. For each of us, though, mistakes that we could never outlive on earth or expectations we could never live up to won't follow us into eternity, because we will have a new name— a new identity. Maybe your new name will be Overcomer. Faithful. Forgiven. Loved. Blessed. Strong. Free.

ⁱ John 12:31; 2 Corinthians 4:4

ⁱⁱ Hamilton Jr., James (2012) *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*. Wheaton, IL; Crossway. p. 87

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 31:3-6 indicates Balaam was "hired" by the Moabites, so a financial motive seems highly likely.

^{iv} Haverluck, Michael. "Survey: Alarming Rate of Christian Men Look at Porn, Commit Adultery." OneNewsNow.com - Your News Right Now. N.p., 14 Oct. 2014. Web. 06 Dec. 2016.

^v Hemer, C.J. (2000) *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing. p. 96-105

^{vi} Pelletiere, Nicole (2015, Jan. 26) Swiss Company Charges \$35,000 for Internationally Unique Baby Names. Yahoo News. Retrieved from <https://gma.yahoo.com/swiss-company-charges-35-000-internationally-unique-baby-165625863--abc-news-lifestyle.html>