
Pergamum: A Wielded Sword

Revelation 2:12-17

Pastor Russ Kennedy

“Come and visit Pergamum”, the Ad read. “This beautiful city sits on like a crown on the top of a hill. We are the capital of our Province, with the wonder of the Roman Imperium and the residence of the proconsul.

“We boast one of the largest libraries in our world, with over 200,000 books. Come and see where parchment was first made. Our theaters are the latest with productions rivaling the best in Greece. No matter what your taste in fun may be, we have it: from pursuits of the mind to the pleasures of the flesh.

“Come to see our festivals and join in with the offering of incense to our Caesar. Join in with our whole populace in publicly testifying to our loyalty to him. Come and worship in our temples. Our altar to Zeus is unmatched. We are a leader in the worship of the god of healing. Come here to feel the beneficent power flowing from the rod entwined serpent.

We are Pergamum. We are loyal. We are modern. We are proud. Come and see why.”

Another side of the city was not touted in this Tour Guide. For to it prisoners were carried from all parts of the province for trial and sentence before the authority who possessed the right of the sword, the power of life and death, that is, the proconsul of Asia. This intensely loyal city, who led the way in offering up its worship to Augustus and a long line of increasingly loathsome Roman emperors, led the way in martyring those who refused to bow.

Somewhere in midst of all this decadent culture, gross pagan idolatry and blazing patriotic fervor, a faithful church spread the fame of Christ by believing and preaching the faith of the Scripture.

To the messenger of the church at Pergamum comes these words. We do not know who he was. We do not know what he looked like. But the contours of a soul passionate for Christ and powerful in ministry are familiar to us all.

The Character of Christ

(v.12)

“One who is wielding a sword.” What are the believers at Pergamum to see and feel when they hear this of Christ?

¹² “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

His Absolute Authority

The power of the sword is the power of life and death. This power the sovereign and august Caesar held. This is the power over the life and death of all his subjects. In their day, Rome wielded the sword over life and death. God had given that sword to her as a means of justice to deal with the wicked (Romans 13:1-7). In this city, where patriotism and loyalty were its motto, the sword moved among the church, not as a minister of justice, but rather as an inflictor of pain and death.

Over this sword, Jesus reigned supreme. Rome may have the power of physical death; Jesus has the authority and power over Rome, death and hell. His authority is absolute. Whenever there were conflicting claims, Jesus’ was to held in the highest regard and in obedient fealty.

His Authoritative Word

But when Jesus Christ the Lord has a sword, it is His Word.

This sword comes from His mouth (Revelation 1:16) and strikes the nations (Revelation 19:11-16). It is the Word of God, living, active and able to penetrate, dividing the soul and spirit (Hebrews 4:12-13). It is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17) and thus, with the breath of His Word, He destroys the wicked (Isaiah 11:4) and the Wicked One (2 Thessalonians 2:18).

The importance of the sword of the Word of God, for it brings:

- Revelation of Christ
- Reign of Christ
- Rescue of the church
- Ruin of the lost

Here is an aspect of Christ that is misunderstood today: Jesus is a warrior. He has a sword. He will use it on His enemies to bring about the righteousness of His rule and reign. Our awe of the majesty of Christ grows as we see with our inner eyes the magnificent dignity of His Person and the awful power of the sword He wields.

In the days of old, warriors gave names to their swords. We would know Arthur and *Excaliber*, Bilbo and *Sting*, Gandalf and *sword*. The Lord Christ has named His sword and it is: The Word, the Breath, Heart Penetrator, the Spirit’s Edge, the Protector of the Elect, and Satan Slayer.

We are not afraid of that sword, however. For the sword that slays Satan and strikes the nations and separates our inmost thoughts is in the hands of our own exalted Sovereign and Savior.

The Commendation of the Church

(v.13)

What a comfort it is that Jesus knows our situations. He knows them in such a way that He is involved with them. The Lord here comforts and commends them by understanding:

¹³ " I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

The Place of their Ministry

Where they loved and labored in ministry was a stronghold of Satan. It was a place where Satan dwelled or was in permanent residence, so much so that He had a "throne" there. The idolatry, immorality and decadence were gay clothes and bright homes in which crouched the rotting soul of the city.

Jesus wants them to sense that He knows what ministry there means. They are not just here on a short mission. They cannot leave and shake off the dust of their feet against the city. This is where they live, where they work, where they worship. This is home, to them.⁴

But it is the hardship of their situation that the Lord knows and understands. He knows how each detail piles up into a mountain of difficulty. He knows this about our ministry as well. We are ministering to city whose hearts are hardened by generations of religious idolatry, whose senses are dulled by the pursuit of alcohol and gambling and carnal pleasures, whose minds are poisoned by error.

"I know where your ministry is..."

The Perseverance in their Ministry

They held true to the Name and truth of Christ.

The Name of Christ - They are clinging to the character and the reputation of Christ. His Name sustains them. It holds them up like a lifeline in the rising tide of filth and sin. They are like velcro kids—they are stuck firmly to the greatness and magnificence and assurance that is in the Name of Christ.

The Faith of Christ -They stand tall and strong in the truth they believe against the howling winds of religious plurality and political power. The house of their faith has been grounded on solid rock and built with precious stone.

"I know you have a passion for my fame and for my truth ..."

The Pressures against their Ministry

Their lives were on the line. Being a Christian did not merely bring some inconveniences—it brought serious questions, challenging problems and life-threatening pressures. They clung to the Name of Christ and refused to deny the doctrines they held dear even as one of their number was taken out and martyred.

Do you see how God measures the strength of their love and the standing of their faith? He places them in the beaker of suffering and raises the temperature of persecution and pours over them the acid of death. The enduring caliber of their character and fiber of their faith may be challenged, but it never crumbles. What about us? Compared to them, we are pot metal alongside the temper of their steel.

"I know the price that sacrificially loving ministry is costing you..."

The People in their Ministry

What a pattern of faithfulness and witness their people were. Antipas is held out as the martyr *whose sacrifice in their church and their culture* was a standard, a model. Even when such exemplary Christians were being singled out for special suffering, the church as a whole never faltered and never failed.

“I know those special people whose lives are poured out for me...”

Jesus says to them, “You are a great church. I do not measure it by size of your crowds, the multiplying of your programs, the greatness of your successes, or the stature of your ministers. You are a great church for, in a dangerous place and in difficult times, you have been faithful to Me and to truth, even when it costs you everything.”

Are we a great church?

The Charge Against the Church

(v.14-15)

While they had stood when Satan persecuted, some had succumbed when Satan seduced. He had not been able to come against them like a roaring lion, but he was making inroads as a seducing serpent.

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: 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. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

There were those in the church who were not holding to the Name of Christ (v.13), but were holding to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. We have been introduced to this little known error in its deeds (2:6) hated by the church at Ephesus and its doctrine (2:15) embraced by some here at Pergamum.

Understanding the Indictment

But what about this “teaching of Balaam”? What and who is that?

Its Condemnation

We need to understand who Balaam was and why he is important to New Testament church leadership. The church then, just as it is now, was plagued by two opposite but equally dangerous errors. There were those who were legalists who wanted the church to live by the Old Covenant law code. On the other hand, there were those who turned their liberty in Christ into license in carnality. The Apostles and Elders of the New Testament are constantly dealing with those whose separation disengages them from any contact with culture and with those whose compromise enslaves to their sin and worldly expressions in their culture.

Its Error

This last error, and those teaching it, is censured by:

Jude 11 - Here the *way of Cain, the error of Balaam* and *the rebellion of Korah* are all labels applied to those involved in the sensuous and carnal lifestyles contrary to the Word.

Revelation 2:14 - The teaching here is the counsel given by Balaam that led Israel getting involved in idolatry and immorality. (Numbers 22-26; 31:16).

2 Peter 2:13-22 - This is the most extensive condemnation of both the doctrine and the deeds of Balaam.

Its History

Who was Balaam? He appears in Numbers 22-25, 26 and in 31:16. He was a Gentile prophet of God who lived near the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. Israel was traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land and was passing through the land of Moab. The king of Moab, Balak, sent and tried to hire Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam finally went. On the way he was met by the Angel of the Lord. Balaam didn't see Him, but his donkey did. Finally, the donkey spoke up (just imagine the scene) and the Lord opened Balaam's eyes so that he could see the Angel. Balaam was ordered by God only to say what God put in his mouth. The result was that Balaam did not curse, but rather blessed Israel. However, as Israel was camped in Moab, she was seduced by the idolatry, began to participate in the pagan festivals and ended up committing immorality with the Moabite women. Numbers 31:16 tells us that this all occurred because of the counsel of Balaam.

What Balaam was to Israel, the Nicolaitans were to the church. See Revelation 2:15, "in the same way"? The Nicolaitans, like Balaam, were preaching and prophesying for their own gain. And they were teaching the church to compromise her holiness and to be sinfully involved in the culture around them.

Applying the Indictment

What does all this mean to us today? Why do we care what Balaam did or what the Nicolaitans were teaching? Remember that when Satan cannot ruin us with persecution, he infiltrates us with seduction. Listen to this indictment in modern terms.

Woe to those who teach what is popular because of the money, power and prestige gained by it. O, we may not be quite so openly greedy as to prostitute our ministry or to hire ourselves out. But how many today are writing books, doing conferences, publishing papers and doing radio and TV because of the money. How many of all these popular Christian stars are teaching unpopular truths: for example, sovereign grace? Or the sufficiency of Scripture?

Woe to those who tell us that we are free to do anything. Now that we have cast off the restraints of legalism, are we becoming enslaved by the sins we were supposed to be delivered from in our salvation? 2 Peter 2:13-22 condemns those who promise freedom but produce slavery.

Balaam and the Nicolaitans led God's people into idolatry and immorality. The church at Pergamum had to stand against the claims of Rome and the pressures of their culture. The government required worship of its leader. The guilds (labor unions) of the day required members to attend pagan festivals. In the midst of this, there were those who said, "A little incense to Caesar doesn't matter. Go ahead go to the parties: just don't worship their gods in your heart. After all, doesn't God want you to provide for your families?"

We hear this today. Immorality is rampant in churches, from the pulpit all the way to the pew. We are bombarded by the images and illusions and messages so much that our sensitivity wanes. There is little difference in the divorce rate inside from outside evangelicalism. Pregnancy among unmarried Christians (not to mention the fornication which goes on without being caught) is only marginally lower. What is wrong with us?

Well at least there is not much idolatry in the church! Listen to Colossians 3:5, “*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*” We may not be bowing down to physical idols (though I think the adulation that some Christian leaders and entertainers gets borders on it), but we are a greedy, covetous people. We are living too much for our material gain. Colossians 3:5 defines idolatry as *valuing anything more than we treasure God*. I could list for you all the idols that my own sinful heart treasures—but then, I would probably miss some of yours.

Let us cling to Christ and hold fast in believing truth though Satan may roar against us or he may seduce us. May we stand firm against the Balaams in our midst whose doctrine and deeds will corrupt us. May we be fully satisfied with Christ, looking to our reward, that is, God.

The Correction of the Church

(v.16)

As parents, we are always thinking through strategies that will effectively correct our children. We have to make sure that we have their attention. We have to point out that what they are doing is wrong or unacceptable or inappropriate. Then we have to ensure that they change what they are doing. Now this is easier said than sometimes done. I wonder if the Lord feels like that about us as well? In correcting those who have fallen prey to the seduction of the flesh and Satan, the Lord adopts a common strategy.

¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

In the Form of a Precept

Repent

He gives us a command. Repent. Simple word. Tough to do sometimes. Usually it is tough because we want to change our behavior before we change our thinking. Rarely works. God wants our repenting to begin with a change in the way we think that bears fruit in a change in the way we act.

He has pointed out what is wrong. He has illustrated how it is wrong from the Scripture and then fleshed it out in their contemporary situation. Then He says, “REPENT.” Sometimes we make it way too complicated. We 12 steps to recovery and all these how to processes when what we need is a basic and fundamental change in our thinking. Repent.

In the Form of a Promise

I will come...

He also gives us a threat. Now this is a common strategy. We adopt it often because it works. “Stop. Change. Or else.” Wonder if we ought to be correcting in this way *because it is how God does?* Jesus basically says, “Repent or else.”

Jesus promises to deal quickly with those who do not change. He is not coming to be nice and kind and winsome. He is coming as a warrior with His sword. And He means business.

I know it is trite to say this. But we too often are simply playing games with God. We don’t believe that what we think and how we behave matters. But God is so concerned that He promises to move against us with the Word of God, the sword out of His mouth.

Let us respond to God in His Word. He means business.

The Challenge to the Church

(v.17)

Once again, the Lord says to us, “Listen up. I have something to say. If you have ears to hear, listen to what I am saying.”

¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’

Overcomers enter into special blessings in their walk with God. Now, the commentaries strain with all their might to be helpful as to what these things are and what they mean. Time will not allow us to try to sort all that out. These three things, however, point out God’s reward to every believer who perseveres in their faith.

Hidden manna - Since it is manna and it is hidden, it must refer to the daily supply of inner sustenance. It is the spiritual strength flowing from our being nourished by grace in Christ.

White stone - Since there does not seem to be an Old Testament referent for this, it must be being drawn from the culture. The most prevalent use was in giving an acquittal to someone accused of a crime. The white pebble signified that the person bearing this token had been declared justified and released from all charges and was to be treated as innocent.

A New Name - This new name is written on the stone. This name is one that new and private for us. This may point to the tradition of giving a new name to Christians at their baptism whose birth names were pagan gods or obscene.

Though we cannot be sure of what all these mean now, we can treat them like birthday presents that are wrapped and waiting for us. We do not know what is in them—but we do know that it will be very special.

Reflect and Respond

Let us cling to Christ—to the His Name and His reputation. Let us never deny what we believe, even in the face of great suffering.

Let us be on the guard for those who, by their doctrine or their deeds, seduce us away from our holiness in Christ.

Let us repent—let us change our thinking and our actions where it is needed. May we do it NOW before the Lord comes to us quickly with His sword.

Let us look forward with trembling joy till the day we get to open these special gifts and enjoy them in their full reality.

Notes

⁴ Now are we to think when we hear this? How do we discern if our place of ministry was like theirs? By the level of opposition to the authority and exclusive claims of the Lord Jesus. The political Rome of their day elevated itself and refused to acknowledge the claims of Christ and arrayed its might against those who did. The religious Rome of our day does the same. We are surrounded by religious groups, churches and powers who deny the exclusive claims of Christ as the sole Redeemer and Ruler whose authority rests in His Word alone.

Do we minister in a place where Satan dwells and has his throne? Yes. If you do not think so, go to almost any religious person around us and insist that Jesus alone is the sovereign and savior and that to no other are we to bow in worship, prayer or petition. Insist that the Bible in its 66 books is absolutely inspired, infallible, inerrant, supreme and sufficient. Don't say it in such a way that this is *your opinion*, but that this is *the truth*. The foul spirit of this age will rise up in the anger and accusations of lost men and women.