

Patmos and the Seven Churches of Asia

By Doug Hamilton

III) The Church at Pergamum (2:12-17)

Rev 2:12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

Pergamum was not on any of the great roads like Ephesus and Smyrna, but historically it was a great city of Asia. When Rome formed the province of Asia, they kept Pergamum as the capital city, making it an administrative city for the government. It was located on a large hill and its splendor resembled a royal city.

It was the location of UA&M (the University of Asia Minor). They had the second largest library in the world at the time, second only to Alexandria, containing no less than 200,000 parchment scrolls. When the King of Pergamum tried to hire the head librarian from the Alexandrian library, Pharaoh became angry at this and had the librarian locked up in prison. To prevent this from happening again, Pharaoh ordered that all papyrus (paper) be cut off from Pergamum. The result was the need to come up with something new to write on. This led to the development of vellum (animal skin) for the writing of books. It was much more durable than paper and is the primary reason we that have the most reliable manuscripts to date.



Rev 2:13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

“I know where thou dwellest”, WOW! What an attention getter. This would be the equivalent to someone saying today “I know where you live”! This is important because even though their citizenship was in heaven (Phil 3:20), they were still in Pergamum dealing with the struggles of an earthly life. Just because a person converts to a spiritual realm does not mean that he or she will not have to deal with the issues of the earthly realm. That’s the beauty of Christ: No matter who or where we are in life, Jesus knows our present state.

Satan’s Throne?

What did the Apostle John mean concerning “Satan’s throne”? There are three possibilities in reference to Pergamum. I will cover them from the least likely to the most.



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A. The Altar of Zeus:

There was the altar of Zeus, 800 feet above the city where smoke poured endlessly in sacrifice to him. It was located near a giant, 10,000 seat theatre and was well known throughout the world at the time of the writing. It had the appearance of a throne and anybody who was “somebody” in the city would have made regular sacrifice there. This enormous altar was taken by the German archaeologists in 1871, restored and put on display in a Berlin museum. Perhaps the Christians would have encountered some problems from the locals for not participating in such a god system.



B. The Temple of Asclepios:

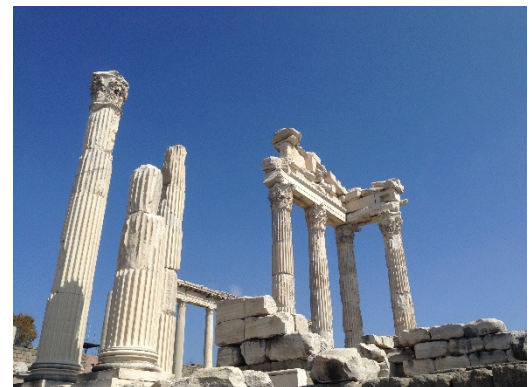
Asclepios was known to the ancients as the god of healing. People would come from all over the region to inquire to the “Lourdes of the ancient world” for their ailments. They would gather in an underground room, smoking drugs and chanting incantations. They hallucinated that Asclepios came to them in a dream and would tell them how to be healed or if their condition was fatal. It was a nice scam which generated large amounts of money for the pagans. There was a common saying during that time that “Asclepios is Lord”. Obviously this caused trouble for the Christians of Pergamum.



The incantation room of Asclepios

C. The Seat of Administrative Power for Asia:

Pergamum held the seat of power, for it was the administrative city of Asia. It was also once the seat of state religion before it passed it to Smyrna. This was where the original temple to Augustus was built and the pressure on the Christians would have been great. Being an administrative city also meant that their governor had “the right of the sword”, which was the power to order executions on the spot. A simple wave of the sword would have meant the life or death of a non-conforming Christian. This is likely the “Satan’s throne” for which John refers and explains why Jesus was powerfully presented as having “the sharp two-edged sword”. Jesus is the One Whom truly has the power to order execution. Can you hear Him saying, “Do you want to see the ‘Right of the sword’? Vengeance is mine, I will repay!”



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Antipas?

What do we know about Antipas? Years after this writing, one of the early apostolic writers mentioned that Antipas was slowly roasted alive in a bronze calf by the Romans. This was one of the cruelest forms of execution during that time.

According to the verse, we do know the following: 1) He was a lover of Christ 2) He was faithful to Christ 3) He was killed for Christ. The word for witness is translated from the Greek word *marturos*, from which we have the word *martyr*. All three of these qualities are necessary to become a martyr for Jesus. His entire life was centered on Christ and for that he was martyred.

Rev 2:14-15 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit {acts of} immorality. ¹⁵ Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Though they did not directly deny the faith, Jesus had more to say about the situation. The Pergamum Christians had some among them who placed a stumbling block of sin before the others. Their actions appear to resemble Balaam from Numbers 22-25. A brief look at this account from the past should shed some light on the subject.

The Account of Balaam

In Numbers 22, we find more than three million Israelites camping out in the land of Moab. Naturally Balak, the king of the Moabites, felt threatened at his Israelite neighbors so he tried hiring a prophet named Balaam to place a curse on them. The king's messengers arrived at Balaam's house, made the offer to him to curse Israel. God sent word to Balaam to not go with them. The messengers went back and reported their failure and the king once again sent them to hire Balaam. This time God told Balaam to go with them (Numbers 22:20).

Apparently Balaam thought about the offer he had missed so the Lord sent a reminder. As he traveled, God's angel stood in the road. The donkey saw the angel that Balaam could not and turned aside from the road. Balaam smacked the donkey, but continued on the side path. The angel appeared in the path, the donkey took a narrow pass and Balaam smacked the donkey again, but continued down the pass. The angel stood in the pass, the donkey, having nowhere to turn, he simply sat down. Balaam smacked the donkey again. *Numbers 22:28-30, "And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?' 29 Then Balaam said to the donkey, 'Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now.' 30 And the donkey said to Balaam, 'Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?' And he said, 'No.' The angel appeared before the eyes of Balaam, saying, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I shall tell you."*



Balaam was caught between carrying out obedience to the Lord and making the big dollars to sell out. He met with the king and eventually advised the best way to harm the

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Israelites would be to intermarry, causing the nation to stumble before the eyes of God. They were to “play the harlot”, sacrificing and bowing down to their gods, causing the wrath of God to be brought about. Jude states in *1:11* *Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.* It ended up not only costing Balaam his life, but also caused the nation of Israel to stumble.

Now back to the problem concerning Pergamum. There were those among the Pergamum church family who were placing stumbling-blocks before their brethren. They knew better; they had been warned; yet they still did it anyway. They were Nicolaitans on steroids. The Pergamum church was about to enter a great persecution and were to “*not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...*” The stumbling-block brothers were attempting to de-sensitize the church through the accepting of loose living and worldly conformation. They were tripping up their brethren and causing them to fall into a sinful ditch.

Rev 2:16-17 'Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. ¹⁷ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give {some} of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

They must repent or Jesus would quickly make war with the sword of His mouth. In scripture, the sword sometimes refers to the word of God. In Eph 6:17, Paul describes one of the parts of the armor of God as “*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*”. Hebrews 4:12 states that the “*word of God is quick, powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword*”. Here we see the sword that comes out of the mouth of Christ. He has the words of life and the words of judgment. The fact that Jesus was threatening war with “them” and not “all” should strike terror in the hearts of all Christians who are serving only with lip service. Jesus knows who has been serving Him and who has not. No matter how hard someone tries to blend in with the church family, if there is only lip service, Jesus will reward each individual with the fruit of His lips, the double-edged sword of destruction.

Reward for Overcoming? He was to give two things to those who overcame.

1) Hidden Manna

The first blessing is the “hidden manna”. Manna was the bread from heaven that God sent to Israelites in the wilderness. The word manna means “What is it?” for they had not seen anything like it before (Ex 16:15). For the entire forty years in the wilderness, they ate these cornflakes from heaven. As a reminder of this fact, they were to keep a jar of this manna in the Ark of the Covenant, which was hidden in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle (Ex 16:33; Heb 9:4). Hence the name “hidden manna” referred to this bread that was in the throne seat of God. Jerusalem was long since destroyed and the Ark of the Covenant and the manna were as well at the time of the writing. For a Christian to hear the hidden manna would be distributed to those who overcome would remind them the Messianic age. It meant that they would be going into the Holy of Holies and in the presence of God. What better encouragement could a persecuted people hold?

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2) White Stone

The second blessing was a white stone. Pergamum was an administrative city, the place where earthly justice for the province was carried out. The white stone is significant because at the time of the writing if a man went to trial, the council would use white and black stones to carry out justice. When it was time for the nine judges of the province to make the decision of innocent or guilty. Their vote for guilty was a black stone being placed in the cloth bag and innocent would be a white stone. When it came time to add the stones, if there were more black stones than white, it meant guilt and execution. If more white, then the verdict was innocence.

What if they were innocent and would return back to their village, would the residents know of their innocence? The judges would order one of the white stones to be engraved with innocence and the defendant would wear it around his neck to protect him against any accusers. In this passage the white stone of innocence is for those who changed their lives to avoid being a stumbling-block to the others.

Application:

Brothers and sisters, if we are in covenant with Jesus Christ, we then will have the hidden manna of provision and the white stone of innocence. No matter what the devil, the “accuser of the brethren”, says to us, no matter what the persecutors of God’s people say to us, no matter what any stumbling-block placing, Balaam-following, “Nicolaitan”, slack-jaw blames us for, we are to hold this white stone up with confidence, knowing that we are innocent in the eyes of Jesus Christ, that death is overcome and salvation is complete. The jury is no longer out and the verdict is in; we are innocent! *Rom 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

This will only happen if we will seek to live a “stumbling-block free” life out of respect for Jesus. Are we a stumbling-block church family? Have we been causing our brother or sister to stumble into sin instead of watching over them in love? We must repent if this is the case. If we do, Jesus has hidden manna and a white stone waiting for us. He wants to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, but only if we allow Him to do so.