

THE CHURCH OF PERGAMUM



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DAY 1

As we head north from Ephesus and Smyrna, we enter a broad, fertile plain. Rising from the center of the golden fields is a mountain, one-thousand feet high. Crowning the mountain is Pergamum, a city the Roman historian Pliny referred to as the most illustrious in all Asia.¹ The very name of the city is related to the word for “citadel.” Pergamum was an imposing, fortified metropolis. But its power did not come from commerce. It was not a port city, nor was it along the major trade routes. No, its power was religious and political. At the crest of the mountain, dominating the city, were great, beautiful temples to Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and others. However, above them all, both literally and figuratively, was the temple of the imperial cult.

Commissioned in 29 BC by Caesar Augustus, this temple, the first of its kind in Asia, was dedicated to the goddess Roma (the very ideal and personification of Roman culture) and to Augustus himself as the semi-divine, living ruler.² The emperor would sometimes visit Pergamum as a kind of home away from Rome. This was the epicenter of the imperial cult in the region. As a result, Christians in the city were in a particularly precarious position. When you hear of Christian persecution within the Roman Empire, it was not the result of Christians wanting to worship Jesus, per se. Rome did not particularly care who you worshiped. Once conquered, barbarians (non-Romans) were allowed to continue worshiping whatever local deities they preferred. All Rome demanded was that the imperial cult be added to any existing devotion. This was obviously a problem for the Christians.

We will explore the impact of the imperial cult more later this week, but the above should give us enough context to jump into the passage. In these verses, Jesus is speaking to a church surrounded by the status, wealth, and symbols of the empire, where refusal to imitate and accommodate is seen as a threat. The church has suffered and will suffer more. Let us turn to the passage and see the comfort and challenge that Jesus offers.

Read Revelation 2:12-17.

As you read these verses, many references to people, places, and practices were made. Of these, what references seem familiar to you? Which were more obscure?

Are you reminded of any other passages of scripture? Which come to mind?

How would you summarize Jesus' message to the church of Pergamum?

DAY 2

Pergamum was full of wonders. Among them was a great library. The Library of Pergamum contained over two-hundred thousand volumes. This library was rivaled only by the Great Library of Alexandria and the two often competed for collections of scrolls and prominent scholars. Pergamum was wise in the eyes of the world. So, to the church in Pergamum, Jesus introduces himself as the one “who has the sharp two-edged sword.” We know from the introduction in chapter one that this sword is pictured coming from Jesus’ mouth. Jesus is emphasizing himself as the Word of God and the source of the words of God. He is the source of truth amid many arguments and narratives.

The picture of the two-edged sword is also found in Hebrews 4:12, which says “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.” It is a picture of the word of God, but especially of the word of God as a source of division and discernment. What better picture for the church of Pergamum to ponder? The gospel, the good news of the kingdom and the inauguration of Jesus as Lord, is divisive. It put the Christians of Pergamum (and across the empire) at odds with their neighbors, at odds with Rome itself. As Jesus said in Matthew 10:34-36, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother . . . And a person’s

enemies will be those of his own household.” Jesus is speaking of his message, which continues to divide, even as it also unites and heals.

This gets at an idiosyncrasy of Christianity. We have the Bible, the word of God that is proclaimed every Sunday, that we pour over throughout the week. And as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . .” But scripture also points to the incarnate Word of God, to Jesus himself. John devotes the beginning of his gospel to articulating the supremacy of the Word that became flesh. We live in a culture where scripture is not rare. From Tim Tebow’s eye black to soundbites from politicians to our morning coffee mug, we are often surrounded by scripture. We know exactly what passages will comfort us or one-up our opponents. How quickly I can assemble my own collection of favorite passages that perfectly conform to my personality and preferences. But then I remember Jesus’ warning to the scribes and Pharisees in John 5:39, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, but you refuse to come to me that you may have life.” I must remember that even scripture is not an end unto itself, but points to Jesus, the source of life and the perfect image of the Father.

Read Ephesians 6:10-20, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, and 10:23-31.

In Paul’s analogy of the armor of God, what is the only weapon given to Christians?

How does Paul ensure it is only the gospel that is divisive, and not himself?

What sections of scripture are you drawn to/do you avoid? Why?

Evaluate your own personal engagement with the Word of God. Given all we’ve read, what would you use to evaluate yourself with regards to the Word of God?

DAY 3

Following his introduction as the one with the two-edged sword, Jesus speaks to the danger surrounding the church of Pergamum: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.” Could the language be any stronger? But how fitting for the seat of the imperial cult in the region. To understand the animosity toward Christians, we need to understand the ideology of the imperial cult. Theologian Warren Carter points to three main tenets of the imperial cult:

- The gods have chosen Rome.
- Rome and its emperor are agents of the gods’ rule, will, salvation, and presence among human beings.
- Rome manifests the gods’ blessings—security, peace, justice, faithfulness, fertility—among those who submit to Rome’s rule.³

Inhabitants of the Roman Empire, therefore, were welcome to worship whatever deities they wished, if their primary allegiance was to the emperor and to Rome. It was a matter of loyalty. Sacrifices were offered to the emperor because Rome kept you safe, because Rome kept you fed, because Rome ensured prosperity. Refusing to participate in the imperial cult was to rattle the very foundations of Roman society.

A parallel can be drawn to our own context. We have neighbors who would be considered “un-American” by some. For whatever reason, those considered “un-American” do not check enough of the dominant culture’s boxes. Such individuals are often seen as a threat. An infamous historical example of this is Joseph McCarthy’s pet project, the House Un-American Activities Committee. It was no different in the Rome Empire. The early Christians were vocal about their primary allegiance; Jesus was Lord, not Caesar. It did not matter that they supported society by helping the poor and marginalized. It did not matter that they prayed for the rulers and authorities, and even the emperor himself. Their refusal to participate in the imperial cult was un-Roman and so they could not be trusted.

The resulting persecution was as predictable as it was tragic. In this passage, Jesus mentions Antipas, an early martyr at the church of Pergamum. Antipas is given the title of faithful witness. This is a title used in Revelation 1:5 for Jesus himself. Think of the honor, to be associated with a description of the risen Christ. But Antipas was only one of many such witnesses. Pergamum is hearing from Christ that he is with them in their persecution. He is not unaware or far-off, but incredibly near.

Read Revelation 6:9-11 and Romans 8:31-39.

What are some entities in your life that vie for your primary allegiance?

What have you sacrificed because of your allegiance to Jesus?

Do you find stories of martyrs emboldening or disheartening? Why?

DAY 4

While Jesus commends the church of Pergamum for not denying his name, they are still met with a challenge. He says there are some who hold to the teaching of Balaam. The reference is to the story of Balaam recorded in Numbers 22-24. In short, Balaam was a prophet hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the people of Israel as they made their way out of Egypt. God refuses to allow Balaam to curse Israel, but Balaam persists, trying to change God's mind. In the end, God still refuses to allow Balaam to curse Israel. But Balaam has an idea. Numbers 31:16 and this passage in Revelation bring the pieces together. Balaam does not have to curse Israel if he can have Israel bring a curse upon themselves. He has Balak and the Moabites invite the Israelites to a feast in honor of the god Baal at a mountain called Peor. The tragedy of the feast is recorded in Numbers 25. This is the first instance of Israel engaging in Baal worship, a sin that would be repeated by Israel for generations.

Balaam becomes a notorious figure in Israelite history, and Peor becomes shorthand for idolatry and sexual immorality. So, when Jesus warns the church of Pergamum about the corrupting influences surrounding them, he goes to the story of Balaam. The Christians of Pergamum are beset with idol worship on all sides, worship that often involves food and sexual practices. Jesus warns there are even some in the church who are placing stumbling blocks for others when it comes to such things. He warns them to repent. Otherwise, he will come and war against them with the very sword of his mouth.

There is one last issue we should address. While we know a great deal about Balaam, we know very little about the Nicolaitans and the teachings associated with them. Jesus seems to tie the two together in the passage. Some theologians guess at the connection, but we do not know for certain. And that can be difficult. There are passages of scripture that, while the overall meaning is clear, may contain obscure details, references lost to time. There is a certain amount of faith in believing that while scripture may not answer every question we have, it has and clearly presents the answers we need.

Read 2 Peter 2:1-22.

What is your initial reaction when the New Testament references the Old Testament?

How comfortable do you feel with the stories and themes of the Old Testament?

Who in your life would you feel comfortable asking questions about scripture?

DAY 5

The trials facing the church of Pergamum are intense. They are surrounded by idolatry and sexual immorality. There are some within the church who are already being swayed by the pressure to accommodate. Continued faithfulness means continued suspicion and persecution, it means facing the wrath of the Roman Empire in all its power and glory, it means trusting the Word of God over the words of thousands upon thousands of volumes by the wise. But like the messages to all the other churches, continued faithfulness also means a reward.

Two things are promised to those who overcome: hidden manna and a white stone with a new name. Regarding the manna, it is hard not to see a reference to John 6:32-33, where Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” The reference to the white stone is a little more cryptic. One possible interpretation relates to Roman tesserae, which were small pieces of stone, pottery,

wood, glass, or other material engraved with a stamp. They were used for a wide variety of purposes. Sometimes they were a sign of friendship. Sometimes they entitled the holder to a gift or entrance into a private event. Either way, both rewards seem to speak to an even greater intimacy with the risen Christ.

Read Revelation 2:12-17.

What questions do you still have about this passage?

What are one or two take-aways from this study? How has this letter to Pergamum impacted you personally?

How would you summarize Jesus' message to the church of Pergamum?

How is his message to the church of Pergamum also a message for the wider church? What should Redeemer Bible Church be watchful for?

FOOTNOTES

¹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book 5, Chapter 33.

² Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 4, Chapter 37.

³ Carter, *Roman Empire*, 7-8.