

The Church Where Satan Dwelled

Revelation 2:12-17

The Lord of the Sword

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write: These things says He who has the sharp sword with two edges” (Revelation 2:12)

Pergamos (also called Pergamon/Pergamum) is the ancient city where modern day Bergama, Turkey stands. Today the area is well-known for Bergama carpets, woven by about 80 villages in the area. In Revelation 2:12-17, Jesus Christ identified himself as the One who has the sharp, two-edged sword. To understand what this means, consider the other times in Revelation that this expression is used. What do these tell us about this expression? In Revelation 1:16, Christ was described as follows: **“And He had in His right hand seven stars: and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and His countenance was as the sun shines in his strength.”**

In Revelation 19, when the Lord returns from Heaven, we read, **“And out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations: and He shall rule them with a rod of iron: and He treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His vesture and on His thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS”** (Revelation 19:15-16). In that climactic chapter, the armies of the world will gather to fight against Christ under the leadership of the Antichrist and the False Prophet. After the Lord casts these two evil leaders into the Lake of Fire, then Revelation 19:21 predicts, **“And the remnant were slain with the sword of Him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of His mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh.”**

The expression, **“These things says He who has the sharp sword with two edges;”** (Revelation 2:12), describes the absolute sovereignty of the speaker, Jesus Christ. In this case, the word “sword” describes a long, flat sword that was fairly heavy. By saying that the sword came out of His mouth (Revelation 1:16), this weapon is identified with His words. But to say that His words are like a sword is ominous; no one should disregard His sword-wielding power. Here we see overtones of hostility toward those who oppose Him. It has often been said that the two-edged sword cuts both ways. We know that God’s Word is like a sword with two edges. Men like David full well understood this in the way that they expressed themselves. Consider, for instance, Psalm 7:3-5, where David began, **“O Lord my God, if I have done this ...”** to emphasize his personal accountability and transparency. But to those who are pregnant with mischief, to bring forth falsehood, the Lord warns that His sword is at the ready and that He will repay the persecutors (Psalm 7:12-16). The governor at Pergamos had the “*ius gladii*” (Latin for “right of the sword”) meaning that the governor had the authority to put a citizen to death. But Christ told them who really had the sword.

In Revelation 19, this same sword is used to describe His complete authority over all the armies of the world. He will destroy these armies with the sword of His mouth. As we shall see, this picture of His Word as a weapon meant a great deal to the saints at Pergamos.

Jesus Declares that He Wields His Sword where Satan Dwells

“I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, *even* where Satan’s seat *is*: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwells” (Revelation 2:13).

Verse 13 begins and ends with a reference to Satan's throne where Satan dwells. The believers in the congregation at Pergamos found themselves in the vise of this vicious adversary. Many have speculated as to the meaning of "Satan's seat" or "Satan's throne." Some point to the temple of Aesculapius Soter, on the nearby plain, where sleeping among non-poisonous snakes was supposed to bring healing. (That historic place gives us the medical symbol used today of a pole with intertwining snakes.) Others say that the altar of Zeus (which looked like a giant throne) within the Roman fortress, was the throne of Satan. That fortress sits on a peak about one thousand feet above the surrounding plain. Some point to the general evil character of the city – sort of a cross between modern day Las Vegas, Rome, Paris and Mecca. The most probable reason for calling it "Satan's throne" was that the capital city was the center of emperor worship – worshipping the Roman Caesar.

But in the midst of this evil place, there were born again believers. They held fast to – or stayed true to – their trust in the name of Jesus the Christ. There were those who would not deny the faith at any cost. One of their number, named Antipas, refused to deny Christ, and it cost him his life. As the days grow darker, and evil grows more prevalent, what will it take for you to deny Christ? Even in the midst of Satan's throne – where Satan dwells – Christians stayed true to their calling in Christ. Those believers at Pergamos are a testimony to us today. How can we face Satanic evil today?

Spiritual warfare is pictured in a militant manner in Luke 11:15-22. There Jesus cast demons out of helpless people. He explained spiritual warfare this way: **"When a strong man armed keeps his palace, his goods are in peace: But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he takes from him all his armor wherein he trusted, and divides his spoils."** (Luke 11:21-22). In that passage, the strong man refers to Satan who governs his stronghold, enslaving men. But the stronger man is Jesus Christ who moves against Satan, overcomes him, takes his armor and divides his spoils – rescuing the souls of men. This military illustration pictures what we are learning from Revelation 2:12-13 – Jesus declared that He wields the sword where Satan dwells.

Jesus Declared the Importance of Scriptural Doctrine where Satan Dwells

"But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. ¹⁵ So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." (Revelation 2:14-16)

To understand the problem at Pergamos, note some important words in verses 14-15: "doctrine," (or teaching), "taught," and "doctrine." We can't miss the point that there were some doctrines being taught in Pergamos that were not Scriptural teaching. Throughout church history, some have said that Scriptural doctrine was not really important. That idea flies in the face of Christ's message to Pergamos. Even among steadfast people who were severely tested by the presence of Satanic forces, Scriptural doctrine was paramount. Jesus took those deviant doctrines very seriously, indicating that He hated them; they led people into adultery and idolatry. But the church at Pergamos was tolerating (and perhaps even enabling) those who taught the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Commenting on these, one author wrote, "Doubtless, the Christian residents of Pergamum would have had no difficulty identifying that about which the apostle spoke; but the distance in time, history, and culture has made the identification of the two problems much less certain. Of the two, in fact, identifying the teachings of Balaam seems easier."ⁱ

We read the story of Balaam the prophet in Numbers 22-24. The king of Moab had hired Balaam to curse the nation of Israel, but he was unable to do so. So Balaam counseled something much more devious. From a comment that Moses made in Numbers 31, we learn what this ploy involved: **“And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD”** (Numbers 31:15-16). Apparently what Balaam recommended to Balak was something similar to this: “Send the beautiful women of Moab among the Israelites to commit sexual immorality with them; this will bring God’s judgment.” The reference to Balaam in Revelation 2 indicates that the church was tolerating sexual immorality – and the teaching that justified that tolerance. About the modern church, one author pointed out that

“invariably dealing with either heresy or immorality in the church never wins friends, introducing as it does a measure of confrontation, conflict, and uncertainty into the life of the congregation. This may well have been exactly the case at Pergamum. Therefore, John characterizes the teaching and practices of these people as being that of Balaam and argues that the church must take action if it wishes to be the recipient of the blessings of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Proverbs 14:15 notes that **“The simple [naïve] believes every word: but the prudent man looks well to his going.”** This proverb helps us to evaluate every teaching we receive. Sometimes, on the face of it, a teaching or doctrine may seem harmless. But we ought to ask: “Where would this take us? Would it draw us closer to Jesus Christ in holy living? Or would it give us an excuse to live in a worldly manner, open to sexual immorality?” This is how wisdom treats knowledge, asking, “How will these ‘facts’ help me to live in the fear of God?” We desperately need the purity of Christ’s words to discern the doctrine of Balaam and depart from the twisted, immoral lifestyle. Perverse, sexual immorality is being written into law in some countries, and our country may not be far behind. According to a bill enacted into law in Canada last month:

“Whereas conversion therapy causes harm to society because, among other things, it is based on and propagates myths and stereotypes about sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, including the myth that heterosexuality, cisgender gender identity, and gender expression that conforms to the sex assigned to a person at birth are to be preferred over other sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions;”ⁱⁱⁱ

Apparently, “conversion therapy” could be something as simple as denouncing sexual immorality and appealing to someone to repent and turn to Christ. So what if our country mimics the culture of ancient Pergamos or modern Canada? Will we still be willing to follow the Lord? Will we trust the Lord of the sword to be our ally, and fight for us? Or will we yield to the culture around us and cause the Lord of the sword to fight against our church? Though it be the law of the land, we cannot allow this error to creep into the church. We will continue to preach that Christ’s death as our substitute, His burial and bodily resurrection will turn us from sin – including sexual immorality and perversion. In Peter’s words, **“Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities”** (Acts 3:26).

It is difficult to say with certainty what the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was, but one of the earliest reliable sources, Irenaeus, described it as heresy. He said that they taught that the divine Christ came upon the human Jesus at his baptism, and departed before the crucifixion. Others try to understand the doctrine by

the meaning of the word [nikos] “conqueror” [laos] “people.” This approach indicates that the Nicolaitans made a sharp distinction between the clergy and the laity – with the former exercising absolute authority over the latter. This interpretation is especially popular among Protestants rejecting Catholicism.

Whatever the case, this warning to Pergamos places an emphasis on holiness while rejecting heresy. Because they had tolerated immorality and heresy, Christ commanded them to repent: **“Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth”** (Revelation 2:16). God calls our congregation to turn from any teaching that would lead us into immorality or heresy.

The Lord of the Fellowship

¹⁷ He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knows saving he that receives it.

Introducing Himself with overtones of hostility, Christ’s message to Pergamos nevertheless concludes on a note of hospitality. He is the Lord of the sword; His words do battle, and He wants us to be Biblical. But He is also the Lord who feeds His own and fellowships with them. For those who will overcome: those who will withstand Satan, love holiness and reject heresy, He offers hospitality. The reference to manna comes from the story in Exodus 16:32-34. God miraculously sustained His people in the wilderness. If you calculate that each person would need about 2000 calories each day in the wilderness, this becomes very practical. Assume that a loaf has 25 slices and each slice has 80 calories - equaling 2000 calories. So each day, God gave each person the equivalent of a loaf bread. Thanks to a Maryland truck driver, trapped in a snowstorm traffic jam on the interstate this week, we know that a semi-truck carries 500 loaves of bread.^{iv} If you estimate that the children of Israel numbered about 3 million, that would be the equivalent of 6,000 semi-trucks of bread every day. The average semi-truck is 72 feet long, so 6000 trucks lined up end to end would extend for 81 miles! And that was just the miracle in the wilderness for physical sustenance. In Revelation 2:17, Christ promised the sustenance for the eternal life of every believer – every persevering saint.

The meaning of the stone is cryptic to us today. But at the very least we can see that it is a gift blessed with intimacy to each of us from God. In this highly personalized gift, God will give each believer a special stone with a secret name – known only to God and the person. We can only imagine, but perhaps that new name will characterize the way that saint of God lived his or her life on earth. What godly characteristic would you love to see incorporated into your new name in Heaven?

Today let us honor the Christ who shows His hostility to immorality and heresy, but freely embraces His own faithful ones with endless hospitality.

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ⁱ Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 39, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 104.

ⁱⁱ Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 39, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 106.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bill C-4, chapter 24, “An Act to amend the Criminal Code (conversion therapy)” Accessed at <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/bill/C-4/royal-assent>

^{iv} Daily Mail <https://www.nation.lk/online/maryland-truck-driver-goes-viral-after-handing-out-500-loaves-of-bread-to-motorists-trapped-on-i-95-162201.html>