

Seven Churches of Asia

The Church at Pergamos

Introduction:

- I. During the period of Old Testament history, when the children of Israel were still wandering in the wilderness and approaching the land of Canaan, they eventually arrived at the region directly east of the Dead Sea that was also the homeland of the people of Moab (called Moabites), and to the north, the homeland of the people of Ammon (known as the Ammonites).
 - A. The Moabites and Ammonites traced their ancestry back centuries earlier when God destroyed the wicked and corrupt cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.
 1. Every imaginable evil and sensual pleasure was practiced without restraint by the people who lived in these two cities.
 2. God finally brought His divine wrath against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by raining down fire and brimstone out of heaven.
 3. Lot, his wife and their two daughters were the only ones who escaped the destruction of the cities, and were told by God not to turn around and look on the cities as they were being destroyed.
 - a. Of course, Lot's wife, whose heart was still with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, turned around to look upon the cities,

and was instantly turned into a pillar of salt for her disobedience.

4. In the days that followed, Lot's two daughters intentionally got their father drunk so that they might be able to conceive children from their father, and thus preserve their father's lineage.
 3. As a result of this incestuous conception, the daughters of Lot each gave birth to a son. One was named Ben-Ammi, who became the forefather of the Ammonites, and the other was named Moab, the forefather of the Moabite people.
 4. The Moabites and Ammonites, were among the most wicked and immoral people living in that region, and often sacrificed infants to large statues of Baal, their pagan god – a hollow statue made with outstretched arms of bronze as shown here.
 - a. Their pagan worship would frequently degenerate into drunken rituals that involved every kind of sexually immoral and wicked practices imaginable.
- B. When the Israelites arrived in the land of Moab, and set up camp there, Balak, the king of the Moab, became very fearful. He had already learned about two decisive battles the Israelites had won over the Amorites and the kingdom of Og.

1. Therefore, Balak asked a noted pagan prophet by the name of Balaam to come to Moab and pronounce a curse upon the Israelites.
2. Even though Balaam had been warned by God against going to Moab, he eventually arrived. But every time he tried to pronounce a curse, it came out a blessing.
3. Therefore, Balaam came up with an alternate plan.
 - a. He knew the men of Israel had been victorious in their battles because they faithfully served Jehovah, the God of Israel.
 - b. Therefore, Balaam encouraged Balak to send the “daughters of Moab” (the young women of Moab) into the camp of the Israelites, bringing meat that had been offered to idols, and enticing the Israelite men to engage in various lascivious acts of worship, and eventually commit fornication.
 - c. The plan worked. What Balaam could not accomplish with a curse, he was able to accomplish by getting the men of Israel to engage in lascivious worship and commit fornication with the young women of Moab.
4. Thus, the Israelites compromised their religious and moral convictions and, as a result, paid a very heavy price.
 - a. Jehovah severely punished the people of Israel.

- II. Compromise has always been a threat to the people of God. But there was probably never a time in the history of the church when Christians faced a greater challenge to compromise their convictions than during the latter part of the first century.
 - A. Christians of the first century were not only tempted to compromise their morality, they had to confront an even greater challenge – they faced the very real threat of persecutions, imprisonment and even death.
 - 1. During the latter part of the first century, the worship of Caesar had become compulsory throughout the Roman Empire, and the Caesars were considered to be divine.
 - 2. Every citizen was required to show their allegiance to Rome by publicly burning incense to Caesar and proclaiming “Caesar is Lord!”
 - 3. Those who didn’t do this were considered disloyal to Rome.
 - a. At the worst, they were rounded up and were slaughtered in Roman arenas by either being burned at the stake, or being slaughtered by lions and other wild animals.
 - b. At the best, they were merely denied the most basic rights – such as the right to earn a living, the right to buy and sell, or even the right to be protected under Roman law.
 - 3. In cities like Smyrna and Pergamos, where Caesar worship was widely practiced in temples, there was a real temptation for

Christians living in these cities to blend in with society to keep from being identified as a Christian.

- a. In Smyrna, Christians refused to compromise and suffered imprisonment and death.
- b. But in Pergamos, the capital of the province of Asia, some Christians DID compromise – and this compromise often took the form of actually participating in Caesar worship, and living their lives in such a way as to blend in with the pagan society.

III. When the apostle John penned the letters to the seven churches of Asia, Pergamos had been a loyal Roman city for well over 200 years.

- A. Pergamos, which also goes by the name Pergamum, is located approximately 30 miles north of Smyrna, and 15 miles from the sea.
 1. The main part of the city set on top of a hill that rose 900 feet from the valley below – a breath-taking sight for any traveler approaching the acropolis of this great city.
 2. Pergamos was known around the world for several things:
 - a. It had one of the most famous libraries in the ancient world, which contained no fewer than 200,000 books.
 - b. The city was the center for the production of parchment (called vellum), which was the most durable form writing material,

made from the skins of animals, and on which many precious books were written – including the Scriptures.

(1). Up until this time, papyrus had been the only writing material available, and was made from the bulrush which grew almost exclusively along the banks of the Nile River in Egypt.

c. Religiously, the city was the center for the worship of Asclepius – the son of Apollo and the ancient god of healing.

(1). The grand Temple of Asclepius was the medical center of Asia, housing schools of medicine and medical wards.

(2). People suffering from various illnesses would come from all over the Roman world to Pergamos and to the Temple of Asclepius, which was filled with harmless snakes, in hopes that they would be healed by coming in contact with one of these sacred snakes.

(3). The symbol of the worship of Asclepius was the symbol of a snake wrapped around a staff – borrowed from the symbol of the serpent that was raised on a staff among the people of Israel to cure them from the bites of the fiery serpents.

d. But, among the other religions practiced in Pergamos, was the practice of emperor worship at this temple dedicated to the

Emperor Trajan. Emperor worship was practiced even more fanatically in Pergamos because the city was the very center of Caesar worship in the Roman world.

(1). And this is the alter where the citizens of Pergamos offered their tributes.

B. The Christians in Pergamos faced the same challenge of persecution and compromise as did the Christians in Smyrna. But in Pergamos, they had one additional problem to contend with.

1. Unlike their brethren in Smyrna, the Christians at Pergamos faced a challenge from within their own ranks.

a. It's hard enough to resist the day-to-day temptation to compromise our morality. But if our own brothers and sisters in Christ (people within our own congregation) are trying to get us to compromise with the world, the temptation becomes almost unbearable.

c. And that's what marked the difference between the uncompromising saints in Smyrna with the compromising saints of Pergamos.

2. Let's turn our attention to the letter addressed to the church of Pergamos found in **Revelation chapter 2.**

a. **Revelation 2:12-17** – *"And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp*

two-edged sword: 13 "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. 15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. 16 Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight 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 I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."

Body:

- I. The Lord begins His address to the church at Pergamos by using words and phrases we found in the first chapter of Revelation.
 - A. After speaking *"to the angel of the church of Pergamos"* (which is probably a reference to the inner spirit or inner life of the church itself),

the Lord reminds them that He is the one who *“has the sharp two-edged sword.”*

1. This is similar John's statement in **Revelation 1:16**, where he saw One like unto the Son of Man, and out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword.
 2. The “sharp two-edged sword” is symbolic or figurative language that refers to the sword of Judgment, and is used throughout the book of Revelation to symbolize God's judgment against the wicked.
 3. The saints at Pergamos needed to understand that God was about to use this sharp two-edged sword against THEIR enemies.
 4. But they ALSO needed to understand that God was prepared to use this same sharp two-edged sword against unfaithful Christians who continued to compromise.
- II. As the letter continues, the Lord closely examines conditions within the church at Pergamos, and tells them what He found: **Revelation 2:13-14** – *“I KNOW your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”*

- A. There are two things the Lord knew. First, He knew the oppressive conditions under which the church at Pergamos had to work.
 - 1. They lived “*where Satan’s throne is*” and “*where Satan dwells*” – which is another way of saying the Christians in Pergamos were living in a place where moral and religious corruption was rampant, and where sensuality and immorality were epidemic!
 - a. It was a city known throughout the world for being more wicked and corrupt than any other city of its kind.
 - b. The people of Pergamos lived in luxury, but practiced the worst kind of immorality and sensuality imaginable.
 - 2. And yet, some of the Christians in Pergamos faithfully performed their “*WORK*” under these most difficult conditions.
- B. Second, the Lord knew that even in the face of past and present persecutions, the faithful saints in Pergamos had not denied His name nor His faith.
 - 1. They would NEVER deny the name of Jesus Christ. He was the ONLY one they would call LORD – not Caesar!
 - 2. And neither had they denied the FAITH of Jesus Christ.
 - a. The faithful Christians at Pergamos were doing exactly what Jude, the Lord’s brother commanded Christians of the first century to do – to earnestly contend for the faith, “*which was once for all delivered unto the saints*” (**Jude 3**).

3. Their faithfulness and loyalty to Jesus Christ even went back to the days of a man called *“Antipas,”* whom the Lord calls, *“My faithful martyr, who was killed among you.”*
 - a. Nothing is know of Antipas, other than what is recorded here.
 - b. But what we DO know is that he died a martyr – he had been faithful unto death.
 - (1). In other words, he chose death rather than deny Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.
 4. These words were obviously encouraging – the Lord knew the trying circumstances under which these saints lived, and He knew they had remained faithful to His name and to His faith.
- III. But as the Lord looked further into the church at Pergamos, He found some things that troubled Him deeply: **Revelation 2:14-15** – *But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. 15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.*
- A. First, the Lord found those *“who hold the doctrine of Balaam.”* **(v. 14)**
 1. Remember, it was the pagan prophet Balaam that urged Balak to send the women of Moab into the camp of Israel to seduce the

Israelite men into practicing lascivious idolatrous worship, and to eventually commit fornication.

2. The wicked prophet Balaam actually encouraged Balak to do

THREE things:

a. First, he encouraged Balak to set a stumblingblock before the children of Israel.

(1). The word “stumblingblock” refers to that part of a trap where you place the bait. When this part of the trap is disturbed, the trap springs and ensnares its victim.

(2). The Lord said, there were those within the church at Pergamos who were doing the SAME THING – setting a trap of compromise that would eventually entrap the entire church unless something was done.

b. Second, Balaam encouraged Balak to get the children of Israel to “eat things sacrificed to idols.”

(1). Balak did this by sending the young women of Moab into the camp of Israel with gifts of meat left over from pagan sacrifices, and eventually enticing them to engage in idolatrous worship itself.

(2). Likewise, the Lord said there were those in the church at Pergamos who were enticing their own brethren to

compromise their religious convictions with the idolatrous practices of the native pagans.

c. Third, Balak encouraged Balaam to send the young women of Moab to entice the men of Israel to commit fornication.

(1). In the same manner, the Lord said there were actually some among the Christians at Pergamos were urging their own brothers and sisters in Christ to compromise **THEIR MORALITY.**

3. Why would anyone who was a Christian want to encourage other Christians to compromise their religious and moral convictions?

a. Some in the church at Pergamos were encouraging others to compromise so they could all blend in with the world around them.

(1). It was dangerous enough to be a Christian in Pergamos and refuse to give tribute to Caesar.

(2). But it was pure suicide for any Christian to stand up and vocally oppose the sinful and immoral lifestyles of the citizens of Pergamos. That was sure to bring on persecution – after all, “lightning always strikes the tallest tree.”

- b. No one was apparently trying to get their brothers and sisters in Christ to openly and overtly throw away all religious and moral restraint and engage in idolatrous and sensual worship.
 - c. Rather they were trying to get their fellow Christians to be MORE TOLERANT, and LESS VOCAL in opposing the practices of the world around them.
 - (1). It was kind of a “live, and let live” philosophy.
 - (2). In other words, “whatever you do, don’t appear to be some kind of fanatical extremist, or some kind of religious zealot!”
4. I can ASSURE you that the Lord’s church faces the SAME temptation to be MORE TOLERANT and LESS VOCAL today!
- a. There are those who don’t want to hear their preacher condemn homosexuality, or openly oppose gay and lesbian marriages.
 - (1). If he does, that preacher is branded as homophobic and is trying to deny people their basic right to have a meaningful relationship with a life-long partner.
 - b. There are those who would object to their preacher speaking out against abortion.

- (1). If he does, that preacher would be branded as denying women their basic rights – although no one seems to be concerned about the rights of the unborn baby.
- c. And there are those who would not want their preacher speaking out against how our society has desecrated the marriage as God intended it to be.
 - (1). He shouldn't preach against divorcing your husband or wife simply because things aren't working out, or because you've found someone you like better.
 - (2). He shouldn't preach against people who aren't married expressing their love for one another through sexual relationships.
 - (3). And I could go on and on...
5. Unfortunately, we live in a time when moral standards are about as loose as they have EVER been in the history of the world.
 - a. And yet we hear people say this is the new millennium – it's the year 2007.
 - b. We don't need to live by all those antiquated rules and regulations we read about in the Bible.
 - c. The standard of morality has changed. This is a NEW AGE, and all you Christians need to come into the 21st century.

6. Let me ask you this. When did God give up HIS right to say what is right and wrong? When did God say YOU determine what is right and wrong for your age, and I'll accept YOUR standards?
 - a. I thought it was GOD who set the standards of right and wrong for society, not the other way around.
 - b. But unfortunately, that's the kind of society we live in – one just like the society the Christians of the first century lived in – a society given to satisfying sensual pleasures, and a society with little or no moral restraint.

7. Whatever you get out of this lesson – just remember one thing:
 - a. It was taking the FIRST COMPROMISING STEP of eating meat left over from being offered to idols that eventually led the men of Israel to GO ALL THE WAY and engage in sensual idolatrous worship, and to commit fornication with the women of Moab.
 - b. In the SAME manner, it's when we take OUR FIRST COMPROMISING STEP of remaining silent when we should be speaking up, that will eventually lead us to be completely swept away by the religious and moral corruption around us.

- B. The SECOND thing troubling the Lord with the church at Pergamos were those who *“hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which things I hate,”* says the Lord. **(v. 15)**

1. While the church at Ephesus “*hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans*” (**Rev. 2:6**), those in the church at Pergamos were actually holding this “*doctrine of the Nicolaitans.*” What is the “doctrine” of the Nicolaitans?
 - a. It’s believed that the Nicolaitans were a sect of the Gnostics, and MAY have taught that whatever sins we commit in the flesh are not charged against the spirit.
 - b. That kind of doctrine completely takes away the guilt of sin – and it opened the door to every kind of immoral behavior imaginable.
 - c. And sadly, when there is NO GUILT, there can be no “*GODLY SORROW,*” and when there is no “*GODLY SORROW,*” there can be NO REPENTANCE. (**2 Corinthians 7:10**)
2. The people of God are facing the same threat today – the threat of feeling less and less guilty over the sins we commit.
 - a. Take a look at your own life:
 - (1). Do you find yourself being more tolerant TODAY of things you ONCE opposed so strongly?
 - b. If you answered “yes” perhaps you’ve been influenced by teachings similar to the “doctrine of the Nicolaitans,” which the Lord says, “*I hate.*”

IV. Finally, came the Lord's warning which is coupled with a promise:

Revelation 2:16-17 – *Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight 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 I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."*

A. The warning was short and to the point – REPENT OR ELSE!

1. Or else, what? *"Or else I will come quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."*

a. In other words, the Lord would come swiftly to wage war against the church by executing judgment on the unfaithful, compromising child of God.

b. The sword of judgment which the Lord was going to use against Rome would also be used against those within the church at Pergamos who did not repent.

B. But there was also a promise. But the promise is given ONLY to those who OVERCOME.

1. The Lord begins by urging everyone to listen carefully – *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* (**v. 17**)

2. To those who overcome the influence to compromise their religious and moral convictions they would be given *“hidden manna to eat.”*
 - a. What does this mean? Back in the days of Moses, God miraculously fed the children of Israel with manna from heaven, which the Israelites collected every day except on the Sabbath.
 - (1). As a memorial of God’s providential care of His people, a container of manna was placed inside the Ark of the Covenant along with Aaron’s rod and the tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments.
 - b. In the same manner, God will ALWAYS provide the basic necessities of life to those who OVERCOME the temptation to compromise – God always cares for His people.
2. And second, those who overcome the temptation to compromise will receive *“a white stone”* on which a new name is written.
 - a. In ancient courts of law, verdicts were reached by jurors placing either a black stone or a white stone into an urn – a black stone to condemn, or a white stone to acquit.
 - (1). In the same sense, those who overcome the desire to compromise will be found innocent and will be acquitted by the Lord Himself when He comes to judge. He will

cast His vote for these faithful saints by giving them a white stone.

- b. The *“new name... which no one knows except him who receives it”* may be a reference to Christ Himself – Peter said for *“neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12).*
- c. Those who overcome will truly be the only ones worthy of wearing the name of Christ.

Conclusion:

- I. So, what’s the most important thing we can learn from the Lord’s comments to the church at Purgamos?
 - A. Perhaps the most important thing we need to learn is that compromise is CLEARLY one of the most destructive forces at work in the life of the Christian.
 - 1. It’s often described as a slippery hill – once you start sliding, it’s extremely difficult, if not impossible, to stop.
 - 2. Sadly, many never realize just how much they ARE compromising themselves, because compromise starts slowly, almost without notice.

B. If you have found yourself taking the first steps toward compromise, stop for a moment and think seriously about where it will lead.

1. **2 Peter 2:20-22** – *For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. 21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire."*

a. What do you suppose Peter meant when he said, *"For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them."*?

b. Let me suggest one possible interpretation – Imagine what it will be like spending eternity in torment knowing we had the hope of heaven in our hands and we let it go.

C. Have YOU become entangled by the pollutions of the world?

1. You need to be the judge of this for yourself – my job isn't to judge whether or not you have compromised your life, my job is to simply

encourage you to think about your life and whatever may need to be changed.

2. If you have never come to Jesus Christ in faithful obedience, your life HAS been compromised by sin.
 - a. The only way to be forgiven of those sins is to truly believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and repent of those sins, and be buried with Christ in baptism so that His blood can wash you clean of every sin you've ever committed.
3. But if you are a Christian, and you realize you have compromised your life along the way, the Lord offers complete forgiveness of any sin you've ever committed, and He will restore you completely.
 - a. All the Lord asks of you is to confess those sins to Him, and be truly repentant – He promises to forgive you of every sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness.