

AVOIDING SPIRITUAL PITFALLS

LESSONS FROM THE SEVEN LETTERS IN REVELATION

SESSION FOUR: PERGAMUM: PITFALL OF COMPROMISING PLEASURES

TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM

¹²"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. ¹⁴Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷He 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. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

The letters to Seven Churches follow this pattern.

The Centrality of Christ

The Affirmation

The Fault Line

The Exhortation

The Promise

A. INTRODUCTION

1. THE CITY

Pergamum (modern day Bergama) is a city built on a cone-shaped thousand-foot hill. It was the ancient capital of Asia since 200 BC. The name in Greek means, "Citadel" and is the seat of Roman government in the region. The old temple of Augustus stood on the lofty rock citadel, conspicuous to anyone who approached the city. There are many temples dedicated to Greek gods and goddesses. This is the first city in Asia Minor to have a temple build in worship of a living Roman Emperor.

There are other institutions in the city besides the machinery of the government. There is the enormous Pergamene library ('parchment' was the name given), the famous healing ministry of the priests of Aesculapius, and the crowning of Zeus, the Graeco-Asiatic god. All these cater for the mind

(library), the body (healing work), and the spirit (worship of Zeus)¹. Added to this is the preeminence of the Roman state.

These elements seem to point to the scene in Revelation, whereby the beast from the earth is joined by the beast from the sea to offer humankind a viable life-structure outside the kingdom of God². They all seem so complete and perfect that it reminded us of the '666' beast. Number 6 is next to 7. The number, '666' represents 'close to perfection' of 777. The anti-Christ usurps the authority of the True Christ by appearing to be a close representation of Christ but yet in reality, acts against and is directly opposed to Him.

B. OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION

1. THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

¹²*"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:*

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

Pergamum was the official center of the imperial cult in Asia. The Roman proconsul at this provincial capital had 'the right of the sword' (*ius gladii*), which is the right to execute capital punishment. Given this backdrop, Christ is presented as the One with a 'sharp, double-edged sword' (v 12). The ultimate power belongs to Christ not to Rome.

The 'two-edged sword' also refers to the judgment of war that Jesus Himself holds the truth and will fight against erroneous teaching.

2. THE AFFIRMATION

¹³*I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*

'I know' underscores again that Christ is intimately aware of the situations.

Jesus knows deeply about:

1. The context in which they live out their faith and witness: Satan's throne – His stronghold.
2. Their tenacity in keeping Christ's name intact.
3. Their faithfulness in keeping their faith even when confronted with imminent danger

The site of Satan's throne' may refer to the following interpretations:

- a. The imposing altar dedicated to Zeus the Savior, whose sculpture included serpents, erected at the city's acropolis, structure that is visible from a distance. This structure was 'a monumental colonnaded court in the form of horseshoe, 120 by 112 feet, whose podium was nearly 18 feet high'.³

¹ Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

² Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

³ Yamauchi. The Archaeology of New Testament Cities.

- b. The temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, symbolized by the snake. This serpent-like god maybe a tacit reference to Satan.
- c. Center of emperor worship in Asia. This should be interpreted in the light of Rev 13: 2 where the dragon (Satan) is said to give its throne to the beast (Rome). Thus, 'where Satan has his throne' symbolizes the authority granted to Rome by Satan.
- d. Entire complex of temples (Zeus, Athena) and emperor cult worship on the hill of Pergamum. Behind all these religious sites, Satan is the prime mover.

My personal preference is that it refers to any one of these as it may occur in the different contexts. When the Christians are forced to participate in emperor cult worship, it must appear to the Christians that Satan has a stronghold on this cult. Or when the citizens turned to these idolatrous worship of Zeus, Satan is in their midst.

In other words, there is a spiritual dimension to these practices. In brief, Satan is working here through the pressures and pleasures of non-Christian institutions and society.

He persecutes Christians and has even killed one martyr. But the commendation of the Pergamum Church is that even though there was martyrdom, they did not succumb.

He seduces through the teachings of the Balaam.

3. THE FAULT LINE

¹⁴*Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.*

¹⁵*Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*

The seduction of the Church has taken place by the people who hold on to the teaching of Balaam (1 Cor 5, 8). The Church held fast in the midst of persecution and suffering but succumbed to the lure of idolatry and immorality. The fault of the Pergamum the opposite of the fault of Ephesus: The former had too much tolerance and too little discipline while the latter had too much discipline and too little love⁴.

Balaam is mentioned in Nu 25: 1f; 31: 16 as a foreigner who enticed Israel into idolatry and sexual immorality. There were some at Pergamum, who engaged in idolatrous sexual liaisons, a practice encouraged by the Nicolaitans at the church in Ephesus and possibly Thyatira.

J.Ramsey Michaels suggests that the word 'Nicolaitans' is a 'coined nickname based on what some believed to be the Greek equivalent of 'Balaam'." The latter, in Hebrew, could be read as 'master of the people' (ba' al'am) while Nicolaitans in Greek could be read as 'conqueror of the people'.⁵

Hence, Balaam is symbolic of spiritual compromise and sexual immorality.

Idolatry and Immorality have these similarities:

1. Appeal to our senses and needs
2. Offer immediate gratification and temporal satisfaction
3. Induce addiction: Once in it, hard to stop and want to continue with more

⁴ Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

⁵ J.Ramsey Michaels. Letters to the Seven Churches.

4. Have a sense of conquest and power
5. Lead to final downfall

The reference to 'food offered to idols' is indicative of a participation in temple worship. According to Acts 15: 29, the Jerusalem Church had advised the Gentile Christians not to partake food offered to idols in view of the close connection between this and involvement in pagan sexual practices (1 Cor 8: 7-13; 10: 20-21).

Given the proliferation and prevalence of temples in Pergamum, it is easy for the Christians to compromise to such practices on the basis of expediency: 'there is nothing so wrong' or 'everyone is doing it, so can we'.

This interpretation finds support in the promise that Christ will provide 'hidden manna' to those who overcome in contrast to those who seek immediate gratification and partake of 'food offered to idols'.

4. THE EXHORTATION

¹⁶Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Jesus Christ's clarion call is to repentance. If not, Christ will fight them with the truth, 'the sword of my mouth'.

5. THE PROMISE

¹⁷He 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. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

'Hidden manna' refers to the Exodus experience and the storage of a pot of manna in the Ark of the Covenant (Ex 16: 32-34; cf Heb 9: 4). The Lord will provide for those who prevail, just as He did during the Exodus.

Jewish tradition had it that the ark was rescued at the destruction of the Jewish temple in 586 BC and hidden 'until God gathers His people together again and shows His mercy (2 Bar 29:8; Sib. Or. 7: 149).

In this context, it refers to the contrast between eating food offered to idolatry, which gives temporary satisfaction and hidden manna, which speaks of God's faithful provision and eternal satisfaction. This is in consonance with Jesus being the 'Bread of Life' (John 6: 31-33).

'White stone with a new name' alludes to:

- a. A sign of innocence: In the ancient world, the casting of 'white stone' is done when the jurors throw a white pebble into an urn or to signify approval and acceptance. Hence, the promise is that Christ pronounce us innocent and He will have a place for us in the company of the redeemed. The color 'white' symbolizes purity or fitness to enter into God's kingdom.
- b. A sign of belongingness – Name has great significance in the ancient world. The name represents the essence of a person. To give a person a new name suggests a fresh beginning and also implies belongingness. We now belong to Christ, who has given us a new name. He has given us a new nature.

Names of gods or supernatural figures were engraved on amulets as a way of claiming their protection. In our Chinese Religious tradition, I remember being dedicated to the 'monkey god' and given a new name, 'monkey' ('lau kou' in Hokkien), symbolizing that I belong to 'monkey god'.

Jesus Himself is given a 'Name that is Above Every Name' (Phil 2: 9-11)

This has credence in interpretation because there is an earlier reference to those 'who hold fast to my name' (v 13).

C. DISCUSSION & APPLICATION

1. 666 is so close to 777. What the world promises to us is so close to the truth but is actually so far from it and so anti-Christ. How then can we discern the difference in our lives?

2. Look at these aspects of idolatry/immorality, (1) Appeal to our senses and needs (2) Offer immediate gratification and temporal satisfaction (3) Induce addiction: Once in it, hard to stop and want to continue with more (4) Have a sense of conquest and power (5) Lead to final downfall.

How do you see this happening in your own life as you battle with your own idolatry and immorality?