

**June 17<sup>th</sup> 2012: Pergamum—Church Under Review. Rev 2:12-17**

In 2007, what became known as the GFC, left many American Banks teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, and to avert a total meltdown the American Government poured a lot of money into those financial institutions. They did so with many stipulations including their right to critically review each bank's performance at proscribed intervals. In such reviews they would look at where they were performing well and where they were struggling, and then give ultimatums regarding what they needed to correct in order to survive.

In many ways this letter to the church at Pergamum is a report of a review carried out by the Lord Jesus Himself on one of His churches. He had created this church at tremendous cost to Himself and poured into it His very life blood. He has set it up as a golden lampstand and He has exercised His right to review both its past and future potential.

This letter reminds us that the Lord does expect His people, the church here on earth, to be effective in their mission for Him. And that He also reviews us, as America reviews its banks, and points out the things we need to change in order to serve Him effectively and faithfully.

For the church at Pergamum the review was both encouraging and discouraging. The description they are given of their Lord whose words they are reading is:

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

Jesus reveals Himself to them as the warrior king with this great sword of Judgment protruding from His mouth. And this is encouraging because He is their warrior King and the sword of judgment is not against them but against their enemies. They are on His side and He loves them.

But as encouraging as this fact is, the Lord's review of His church at Pergamum showed that they had inadvertently put themselves in a place of great danger. They had failed to expel these adversaries of the Lord from their midst, and they were doing so much damage to the Lord's testimony in that place, that the Lord would be compelled soon to come and execute His judgment as Warrior King against them. And in doing so the church would suffer too. Its lampstand would be seen as corrupted and its witness in that city destroyed.

(We have seen sad examples of that happening in our age. Large church organizations where so many really faithful Christians have chosen to turn a blind eye to atrocities performed by some of the leaders. Despicable acts of child abuse that have been carried on in secret, till finally I believe, that the Lord Himself could take it no more. The secrets have been revealed. The sword of judgment has been swung, and sadly, the witness of that organization—the faithful majority and the wicked minority—has become a curse on the name of Christ and not a blessing)

For the ancient church at Pergamum the disaster that this would be is compounded by the good beginning that this church had made. They had a great history of faithfulness under immense persecution. Consider v13:-

***<sup>13</sup> 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 where you live, says Jesus. The place where Satan has His throne. Jesus knew all the horrors of the place in which they dwelt. He knew the struggles it caused them. The evil acts they had to endure. The severe temptations it produced. The name Satan means adversary and these Christians lived in the city where their Lord's adversary and therefore their adversary was king. Satan lived in their community.

Can you imagine being called by Jesus to live for Him in a place where Jesus Himself informs you, Satan has set himself up as king?

That it seems was the lot of these Christians, and many commentators have sought to show why Pergamum was called by the Lord as the place of Satan's throne, and the city where Satan lived. And they come up with many ideas gleaned from its ancient history.

But it would seem that the main reason it was so named was because of the Temple to the Roman Emperor that was built there. As we saw last week Smyrna had been chosen first to build a Temple to the Emperor and had done so with great relish. But Pergamum had always been a faithful supporter of Rome and proud of it, and Pergamum petitioned Rome for the same privilege. Consequently 3 years later Pergamum was allowed to build

their own Temple for Emperor worship and they were determined to make theirs the best and most effective.

So whereas people in Smyrna could get away with a yearly sacrifice to the Emperor, Pergamum expected much more from its citizens. Regular worship at the Temple was demanded and acknowledgement of Caesar as God was a law that was rigidly enforced constantly. That's the pressure these Christians in Pergamum lived with every day. They were the front line troops in the battle and they suffered casualties.

Consider again the words of v13. ***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.***

In such a dreadful place those Christians had remained true to their faith. They had upheld the name of Jesus as Lord against those who demanded that they worship Caesar as Lord instead, or as well. And one man in particular, Antipas, had been put to death because he refused to renounce his faith in Jesus. And church history tells us that he was killed by being roasted in a huge brass container that was shaped like a bull. Killed in a way that would strike fear into the hearts of his brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet still they too, refused to renounce their Lord and Saviour. What passion. What commitment. What faith we see in these Christians who lived in the place where Satan dwelt.

And to such Christians in such a position the Lord says, I know where you live. I know because I am with you, standing alongside you, giving to you the special gift of faith and courage that will sustain you even to death for my name's sake.

And that's so encouraging. Because the Lord knows where you live too at this time in your Christian experience, and although it is nothing like Pergamum it may still be a place of immense pressure. Pressure to turn aside from Jesus. Pressure to give into fear and anxiety. And He is beside you too and promises to sustain and keep you.

Never forget the promise found in Isaiah 43:1-3

***"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;  
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.***

**<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and when you pass through the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.  
When you walk through the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.  
<sup>3</sup> For I am the LORD, your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior”**

So this church review of Pergamum has come up with some really encouraging signs for its future. It has emphasized the difficult place the church has to minister in, but has also recorded how they have stayed true to the Name of Jesus despite the pressure to do otherwise.

But the review is not over. There is an issue in the church that must be dealt with before immense damage is done. The church was allowing people who followed the most destructive and evil teachings to be part of their fellowship. Look at v14-16

**<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup> Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**

You may remember Balaam as the guy who rode the donkey that talked. That happened because the enemy king Balak, was willing to pay him a huge amount to curse the army of Israel. God however, would not let him do that but forced him to bless God’s army and curse the enemy. However, the story did not end there. Balaam went on to earn his money by convincing the Moabite women to lure the Israelite men into sexual immorality and worshipping their gods. By doing this he gave his name to the insidious practice of seeking to corrupt God’s people from within.

At Pergamum there were obviously this group who had infiltrated the church and were attempting to convince the faithful that it was OK to be a Christian and still live like a pagan. Immorality and sacrificing to Caesar was acceptable to everyone else and there was no reason why it shouldn’t be acceptable to them too, was their insidious message.

The Nicolaitan group was also there and they felt that the more you sinned the more you gave God an opportunity to forgive you, which of course made God look even more merciful. So sin as much as you like for then you give God more opportunities to be merciful, and He just loves being merciful.

Now we can only guess at why the faithful majority allowed this evil minority to remain in their midst. Perhaps they thought they were harmless and that they could influence them for good. Maybe they were powerful people, or wealthy, or family members. The problem was that they were not good for that church and unless the church rooted them out, Jesus would come with His sword and the church's witness would suffer too.

(I recall a country church where a prominent person in that church, who had come from an ultra conservative cult, would regularly write shocking things about the Pastor in the local newspaper. The Pastor was at his wits end because the majority of church members would not support his desire to cast that guy out of the church. You see that man was a prominent business owner in town and most of the membership depended upon his business in one way or another. And weekly the church's name in that town was being downgraded.)

God is holy and we must safeguard that holy characteristic in His church here on earth. There is no room for false teaching or acceptance of those who would lead others away from the true faith.

But there can also be occasions when such attacks can come from within our own lives. Things we are allowing to remain in our hearts and lives that corrupt our personal witness and pollute our faith. I know of professing Christians who struggle with pornography. I recall a deacon who had an hidden life of illicit affairs. It's too easy to excuse drunkenness or gambling or other addictions in our lives because no one knows, and God will excuse me. But the sense of this letter is that the Lord does know and He calls you to deal with it, before He intervenes to cleanse you with His sword.

Thankfully the review of this church did not end with that note of potential judgment but with a gracious promise.

The risen Lord will give the believer who stays pure—who overcomes all the attacks from without and within—hidden manna. The bread of life that is hidden from the world but given to the believer. The food that sustains when we need it most.

And also a white stone with a new name written on it.

Now obviously the Christians in Pergamum knew what He meant by that. We can only guess. But we do know that one of the features of the Roman Empire was the provision at times of free food and free entry to gladiatorial games and other entertainment. The tickets which entitled you to such things often took the form of a white stone.

Christians who were seen so often as enemies of the State would not have been given those white stones. Because of their Faith there would have been many things like that they would have missed out on. And for us too there are things of the world that we cannot enjoy because they go against the holiness God desires of us.

But the Risen Mighty Lord has a white stone reserved for us which has our new name written on it which only we know. That new name which is written down in glory which proclaims us as holy to the Lord. The white stone that gives us entry through Christ into His eternal Kingdom

That's the white stone which is reserved for each person who overcomes through Christ Jesus. And no one and no power can ever take it from us.