

Revelation. Pergamum- an Idolatrous Church Revelation 2 v 12 – 17

The 1st century city of Pergamum was a real capital of paganism. There were notable temples to Zeus, Athene, Dionysos and Roman emperors. It was also home to the Greek god Asclepius, believed to be the god of medicine and healing. People travelled from all over to Pergamum to worship at his temple in the hope of finding a cure. He was pictured carrying a staff with a serpent twined around it and this remains a symbol of medicine to this day. You can see variations of this symbol in hospitals and pharmacies everywhere.

The risen Lord Jesus Who is the eternal 'LOGOS' and Who speaks the truth of God's Word was less than complimentary about Pergamum. He said it was a city where Satan, the serpent of Eden had a 'throne', a strong influence. That influence was seen in all the idolatry, mistaken philosophy and the widespread immorality that so often goes with them.

Like Smyrna, the Christian Church in Pergamum would face times of bitter opposition, some of it very blatant, as when one of their members Antipas was brutally executed. The Lord commends the Christian minority for staying faithful to His name, even when under such cruel pressure. We're reminded that our top priority as Christians must always be to uplift Jesus and bring honour to His name, the name that is above every name.

While Jesus commends His followers in Pergamum for remaining true to His name and not renouncing their faith He does warn them about more subtle influences. The Devil does not always oppose the Church with *obvious* threat of violence. Often he instead infiltrates our life and fellowship with sneakier tactics, tempting us with various kinds of idolatry and immoral behaviour, which he can make seem like a great idea and very attractive.

That's what this section about Balaam and the Nicolaitians is about . Balaam was quite a sinister Old Testament character who was hired to curse Israel but forbidden to do so by God. That didn't stop him plotting with their enemies, advising King Balak to undermine Israel's strong defence in the Lord by tempting them with worldly values and sensual pleasure. Some in the fellowship in Pergamum were encouraging a lax attitude towards such things and the Lord urges His people to be careful.

If we give in to such things, the Word of God, here pictured like a double-edged sword in the Lord's mouth, will cease to bring us the comfort of God's grace. Instead it will cut the other way and become an indictment, declaring us guilty of sin and liable for discipline!

Repent, says Jesus, to those Christians who are practising idolatry or immorality, or I will become your enemy and my Word will become a weapon to strike you down!

And yet, as before, with the challenge comes a gracious promise. To the faithful who remain true to the name of Jesus in both profession and practice will be given manna, the bread from Heaven, and a white stone with a God-given personal ID. Members of a jury in the ancient world who were voting "not guilty" handed in a white stone. Jesus who suffered for our sins on the cross, gives a 'not guilty' status to those who trust in and follow Him closely. We will be vindicated and owned by Him on the Day of Judgement, and even now He helps us.

We will be rewarded with more of Him, His light, His love, His provision in the wilderness, all the while pleading our case in the courtroom of Heaven. Those who lift up the name of Jesus, in the midst of threatening competition will be known and kept and honoured by Him!

So here is the message from God's word today – it's not difficult to understand. Keep trusting in the Lord Jesus, He will feed us the heavenly bread of life by His Spirit, live in us and keep us, whatever the opposition as we strive to lift His name higher than any other. But

we are advised to be wise as to the devil's schemes. Sometimes it's clear, obvious opposition from the outside. Often it's more subtle infiltration, compromising our worship and fellowship and witness from within.

So we must ask ourselves are there things in our lives that we are putting above or before Jesus and the Gospel cause? Are there ways in which we are putting our own comfort and pleasure before a God-pleasing life of obedience and sacrifice for Him?

We like our cars and our homes and our wardrobes and it's not necessarily wrong for Christians to have possessions. Material prosperity is one way in which God sometimes blesses His children. But how much do we spend on these things compared with what we give to the Church to further Christ's mission? Do we sometimes slip into idolatry by putting material things before Christ?

Sex outside of marriage is wrong in God's eyes. But the standards have changed in the world and many are tempted to neglect God's standard in favour of the common practice we see in magazines and movies and TV. Are we as Christians prepared to be different and to show reverence for Jesus in our human relationships or might these become another idol?

What about our worship in church? We like to think we as a group of professing Christians would never put anything above the name of Jesus our Saviour. But do we in fact love some of our traditions more than the Lord Himself? The Pharisees were often guilty of this. And this is what our enemy, the devil, the 'father of lies' is so good at. Redirecting our attention from the Lord to ourselves. Getting us to engage in *self*-worship while all along thinking we're doing a good and honourable thing.

So as we move to a conclusion, here's the choice we face along with the congregation at Pergamum. We can opt for the fancy car, questionable relationship and church traditions the way we like them

and risk the indictment of the Word of God from the mouth of Christ, the rebuke rather than assurance of the Saviour.

Or we can lay everything – everything in submission at His feet, that His name be lifted up above every name, that His Kingdom be furthered, that His Church be built and that we receive from *Him* the approval that matters most.

Amen