



THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

"If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them"

2:12-15

Pergamos was especially known as a center for the worship of the deity known as Asclepius. Represented by a serpent, Asclepius was the god of healing and knowledge. (It's why we represent medicine with the serpent on the pole). There was a medical school at this temple in Pergamos. Because of the famous temple to the Roman god of healing, sick and diseased people from all over the Roman Empire flocked to Pergamos for relief.

Sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple. In the temple there were tame snakes. In the night the sufferer might be touched by one of these tame and harmless snakes as it glided over the ground on which he lay. The touch of the snake was held to be the touch of the god himself, and the touch was held to bring health and healing (Barclay).

As this letter unfolds we see Satan slithering around the church seeking to 'touch' the believers - not for healing but for deception.

Satan had been on a rampage, persecuting the church throughout the Roman Empire. The church at Smyrna was warned,

Revelation 2:10 "... the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

From 100AD until 312AD Christians were indeed subjected to all sorts of persecution under the reign of ten particularly cruel Caesars. Yet the church grew stronger than ever! Shedding the blood of its martyrs was not having the effect Satan expected. Instead of hindering the growth of the church, it was helping it.

A change of strategy was in order. Not able to beat them, Satan joined them. By 312AD the last of the ten Roman emperors who had persecuted the church was dead. There was a struggle for power in the Roman Empire. A young man named Constantine prepared to engage in battle. According to legend, he saw a cross in the heavens and heard a voice say, "In this sign conquer." Thus you have the so-called conversion of Constantine to Christianity.

What really happened was this: Substantially outnumbered, Constantine noticed that a large segment of the population was not enlisting in either army. They were the Christians. His so-called conversion provided him with an infusion of new troops. He went on to conquer Maxentius in the pivotal battle, and when he marched into Rome he was hailed as the undisputed Emperor.¹

As it turned out, Constantine conquered more than an opposing army. In a sense, he conquered the church - not permanently, for Jesus has told us that **the gates of hell** cannot prevail against the church. Nevertheless his so-called conversion led to certain reforms in the Roman Empire that had disastrous consequences for Christians. Pagan priests and practices were integrated into the worship of the Christian church. The church was free from persecution from the outside, but faced a far more devastating enemy now from the inside that was leading Christians to compromise with the world.

¹ Courson, *Revelation*, Volume 1.

The church had known the sword of persecution for over two centuries. Now that sword was put back in its sheathe. Persecution was ended; but *pergamos* was beginning! *Pergamos* is a compound word made up of the prefix *pergos* and the root *gamos*.

1. *Pergos* means *tower* or *elevation* or *height*.
2. *Gamos* is the root word for marriage; thus we have monogamy or polygamy which use the root *gamos*.

As the letter unfolds we see that the church was elevated and thus became married to the world.

Revelation 2:12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:

Each letter opens with a description of Jesus borrowed from the seven-fold description of the risen Christ in chapter one. Each time, the description is also the solution to the dilemma faced by that particular church. With Satan's sword sheathed the church needed Jesus' sword to be unsheathed!

It is, literally, *the sword, the two edged one, the sharp one*. Reference is made to this sword seven times in the Bible (Luke 2:35; Revelation 1:16, 2:12 & 16, 6:8, 19:15 & 21). The last two references, in chapter nineteen, make it clear we're talking about the Word of God since it proceeds out of Jesus' mouth.

A **two-edged sword** means there can be no compromising the truth. A doctrine is either true or it's false. The Word of God reveals which it is as we compare the teachings of men with the truth of God.

Revelation 2:13 "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.

Jesus was in their midst. **Works** does not appear in the best manuscripts. The emphasis was on knowing **where** they **dwell**. Jesus was familiar with the pressures of their environment. He knew they were besieged by the world and their elevated status.

Author and theologian Loraine Boettner writes,

...after the so-called conversion of Emperor Constantine, Christianity was declared the state religion, and multitudes of pagans were admitted to the church by baptism alone without conversion. They brought with them their pagan rites, ceremonies, and practices which they gradually introduced into the church with Christian names, all of which corrupted the... faith and the church became Romanized and paganized.

Pergamos was **Satan's throne**. We believe in a personal devil. There is a supernatural being, a fallen angel, who heads a rebellion of fallen angels against God. He is not however in any way equal with God, and there is no doubt as to the ultimate outcome. God tolerates and actually uses Satan's evil schemes for your good and God's glory.

Satan is not omnipresent; he is not everywhere at once. In the first century, he was in Pergamos. Jesus said the devil dwelt there. That was his headquarters on the earth at the time.

Satan and his fallen angels do seem to be territorial... But that doesn't mean we should go around seeking to map their influence or territory. Just stand in the armor of God.

They held fast to Jesus' **Name**, meaning the truth about Him as revealed in Scripture. What is that truth? It is that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh, died and risen from the dead. Attacks against Christianity always alter the biblical truth about Jesus.

They **did not deny My faith** even when facing death for it. Notice it's not just faith in Jesus. He calls it **My faith**. Elsewhere it's called the faith. Again we're talking about what is revealed by God about Himself through His inspired Word. In theological terms we'd say that they held fast to and did not deny the authority of the Bible. To them it was inspired, inerrant, and infallible. They therefore had to live by it even in the face of death.

Antipas is given as an example. Not much is known of him beyond what Jesus says here. Church tradition says he was put inside a brass bull and roasted to death. His name means *against all*. His life represents the millions of believers who for over two centuries would

stand “against all” that the devil could muster and remain victorious in life and in death.

Persecution only strengthened the church on earth. So Satan sheathed his sword and tried a new, far more sinister strategy. He joined the church and convinced believers to compromise.

Revelation 2:14 "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.

Now we come to what Jesus had **against** them. Jesus said **you have there**. They were tolerating folks who held to false doctrines. We cannot ever tolerate false, unbiblical teaching within the church.

The stage set for compromise from within, two particular doctrines began to deceive the life of the church: the **doctrine of Balaam** and the **doctrine of the Nicolaitans**.

Balaam's story is recorded in the Old Testament Book of Numbers, in chapters twenty-two through twenty-four. The nation of Israel was marching from Egypt to the Promised Land. No nation could withstand them on their journey as they walked with God through the wilderness. King Balak of Moab was rightfully terrified of them. He sent for a Gentile prophet named Balaam to employ him to curse the nation of Israel. Three times Balaam tried to curse them but each time the words he spoke blessed them instead.

Unable to curse them, but still desiring the money that Balak had offered him, Balaam counseled Balak on how he might yet stop the march of the Jews. Balaam told Balak to send the Moabite priestesses into the camp of Israel to seduce the Jewish men into celebrating their pagan feast of Baal-Peor. The feast involved idolatry and sexual immorality; the priestesses were also prostitutes.

The plan worked. Their compromise had devastating results. God sent a plague into the camp of the Israelites that killed twenty-four thousand of them. Compromise from inside the camp had accomplished what no sword could have in conquering God's people.

The plague was finally stopped when a sword was unsheathed. Phinnehas entered a tent where an Israelite and a Moabite woman were having sex and ran then through.

I think we can conclude from this reference to Balaam that the doctrine(s) being tolerated in Pergamos had something to do with suggesting that our liberty in Jesus Christ is liberty to engage in sin.

It might be that a faction sneaks in to our church with a teaching directing us that it's OK to sin. More likely we just get desensitized over time and increase our liberties until we are sinning.

It may have been as simple but as sinister as believers intermarrying with nonbelievers who were involved in the various cults. Such unions would involve the believing spouse in activities that were pagan and idolatrous, even immoral.

Revelation 2:15 "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

This compound word means to lord or rule over or conquer the people. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans is to establish and promote a priesthood that is over the average person in the church.

The New Testament teaches that every believer is considered a priest. There is to be no special class of men or women who are priests over others.

When Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the Temple at Jerusalem that separated man from God was torn in half telling you that everyone and anyone can come into the presence of God through Jesus Christ alone and without the aid of a priest. Any sort of special priesthood that is over believers, or between believers and God, is contemptible. Jesus says plainly **which thing I hate**. I must hate what Jesus hates.

The result of these deceptive doctrines is still with us today. Biblical simplicity is replaced by a complicated hierarchy of church organization. Human creeds are substituted for true Bible doctrine.

The church leaders are seen as being just as authoritative as the Bible itself.

Each generation also has its own deceptions. Currently the church is struggling with what is being called the emergent church movement. It's hard to get a handle on. Generally its proponents will deconstruct and then attempt to reconstruct traditional biblical doctrines in order to accommodate a broader, interfaith message that they sometimes call a "conversation." They tend to reject absolutes as rigid. They emphasize subjective experience over objective truth.

If Satan can't defeat you as the roaring lion he will attack you as the deceptive serpent.

How can I avoid deception? Staying with the Lord's own analogy I would say this. The danger was becoming married to the world. But you are already married to Jesus Christ.

To use a crude but common expression, we don't want to get into bed with the world or the cults or the devil. We need to start seeing our minor defections as spiritual adultery.

James boldly said,

[James 4:4](#) Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

You never set out to commit spiritual adultery. One reason you do is because you don't see it that way. Physical adultery starts by letting you're your guard (or never putting one up). It progresses by thinking that thoughts are not as significant as behavior.

You are betrothed to Jesus. Get a guard up! Be in love and protect your love.