

The Church at Pergamum

2: 12-17

DIG: What pressures were the believers in Pergamum facing? At what point were they strong? Where were they tempted? To what does the statement where Satan has his throne refer? What do you think is easier to endure: persecution by enemies or seduction by culture? Why? Why is the title by which Messiah reveals Himself so appropriate to the faithful there? What is the significance of the sword? Of the hidden manna and the white stone?

REFLECT: What cultural influences distract you from your relationship with Christ? How subtle are these influences in your life? How direct? Has worldly compromise ever led to total disobedience in your life? What weapons has God given you to do battle against that? Which has proven most helpful? Do you acknowledge Jesus publicly as Christ? Or is it too costly for you to do that?

For many people in the Church, the term *worldliness* has a quaint, old-fashioned ring to it. They associate it with prohibitions against things like dancing, going to the movies, or playing cards. Today there are some churches that don't preach much against worldliness. It might make somebody feel uncomfortable.

But the Bible doesn't hesitate to condemn worldliness for the serious sin that it is. Worldliness is any preoccupation with, or love for, the world. Since believers are not part of the world system (John 15:19), they must not act as though they were. The Apostle Paul wrote: **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - His good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2).** Because they have been redeemed by ADONAI's grace, believers are called to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age (Titus 2:12). James encourages us to **keep ourselves from being polluted by the world, because anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (James 1:27b, 4:4).**

John makes the believer's duty to avoid worldly compromise unmistakably clear when he says: **Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the**

Father but from the world. The world and its desires will pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (First John 2:17). **The church in Pergamum**, like many today, had failed to heed to biblical warnings against worldliness. Consequently, it was flirting and in danger of falling in love with the world.⁶⁷

We face similar challenges today. "It's not really a lie - I just didn't tell the whole truth." "I have no problem reading horoscopes with my friends - I don't really believe in them." "So I look at porn on the internet - it's just like looking at a menu. I'm not ordering anything." Every day we are faced with opportunities to compromise our faith. It may not seem like a big deal, because we're not overtly denying Yeshua. But the unintended consequences can be far greater than we could ever imagine. Sin always promises more than it can deliver, and costs you more than you wanted to pay.

The believers **in Pergamum** also had plenty of complicated choices. Should they go to a nonbeliever's banquet, when some of the food might have been sacrificed to idols? What about buying meat at the market, where it was hard to know whether it had come from the pagan temple? Their temptation was to "bend the rules" a little bit so that they could fit into **the world**.⁶⁸ The issue that the believers **in Pergamum** faced is the same one that you and I face today. How can we lead godly lives in the midst of a sinful world that offers other answers to life's dilemmas?

1. The description of Christ: Like a cancerous tumor that penetrates and spreads through healthy flesh, worldly compromise allows lies to invade the truth, ultimately destroying it. Only the **sharp** scalpel in the hands of a meticulous surgeon can remove the cancer without killing the patient. Likewise, **Messiah, the Great Physician**, is qualified not only to diagnose, but also to successfully treat the disease of worldly compromise. The One **who held the sharp, double-edged sword** was the glorified **Christ Himself (2:12c)**. The type of **sword** mentioned here is the *rhomphaia*, a weapon similar to the sword used by the Romans in battle. This image, as seen in **John's** first vision of **Messiah** in **1:16**, deliberately points back to the Greek translation of **Isaiah 11:4** in the Septuagint. There Jesus is seen as the **Judge** who comes to **strike the earth with the sword of His mouth; with the breath, pneuma or Spirit** in the Greek, **of His lips He will slay the wicked**.

He established Himself as the **Judge** who will make war against His enemies at the Second Coming (**19:15**). As **Judge**, He wields a **sharp double-edged sword**. **The sword** from His mouth, therefore, symbolizes the verbal pronouncement of judgment. **The Lord's** enemies, who will gather in the Valley of Jezreel against **Him** with their arsenal of weapons, will be destroyed simply by the words of His mouth (see **Ex - The Eight Stage Campaign of**

Armageddon). Paul used the same type of imagery to refer to **the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:17)**. Likewise, the writer to the **Hebrews** describes **the word of God** as being more powerful than a **two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12)**. Although referring to a different type of sword than the *rhomphaia*, the point is clear: **Yeshua's** warfare against rebellion and evil will be swift and decisive.

2. The church: The book of **Acts** does not record the founding of **the church in Pergamum (2:12a)**. According to **Acts 16:7-8**, Rabbi Sha'ul passed through Mysia, which is the area that **Pergamum** was located in, on his second missionary journey. But there is no indication that he preached or founded the body of believers there. It was probably founded during Paul's ministry in Ephesus (**Acts 19:10**). Because it was immersed in pagan culture, it was continually enticed into sin and forced to worship Cesar as Lord.⁶⁹

3. The city: Again if you would travel the normal trade route, going north from Ephesus to Smyrna, you would continue north about 55 miles and come to **Pergamum (2:12b)**. The name **Pergamum** means *thoroughly married*. It was the northernmost of the seven cities. The Roman writer Pliny called it "by far the most distinguished city in Asia."⁷⁰ By the time **John** wrote **Revelation**, it had been Asia's capital for almost 250 years. Today the city is called Bergama. The city was located on a huge granite hill that rose a thousand feet above the plain of the river Caicus and lays about 10 miles inland from the Aegean Sea.⁷¹

The last king of **Pergamum**, Attalus III, left his territory to Rome, and it was made the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. It was the first city of Asia to openly support emperor worship. In 29 BC a temple was dedicated "to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma," and thus became the heart of emperor worship at that time. Observance of this worship became a test of loyalty to Rome and refusal to take part in the daily cult was considered high treason, punishable by death. Thus, in other cities, believers were primarily in danger on the one day of the year they were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor; however, **in Pergamum** they were in danger every day.⁷²

Pergamum was also a center for many other deities. All of their pagan temples were located a thousand feet above the plain, with the main market place below. There was an amphitheater that could seat 10,000 people. There they had a huge, forty-foot altar dedicated to Zeus and a temple where they worshiped Athena.⁷³ The city was extremely spiritually corrupt.

It also had a great university with a library with over 200,000 hand written volumes. It was so impressive that it was later sent to Alexandria, Egypt as a gift from Mark Anthony to his lover, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. Trying to build a library equal to Alexandria's, the third century king of **Pergamum** tried to lure the librarian in Alexandria to his city. However, the plot was discovered and in retaliation, the Egyptian ruler refused to sell **Pergamum** any more papyrus. So out of necessity, the Pergamenes developed parchment, made of treated animal skins, for use as writing material. Though parchment was actually known from a thousand years earlier in Egypt, the Pergamenes were responsible for its widespread use in the ancient world. In fact, the word *parchment* may derive from a form of the word *Pergamum*. It was a very important city to the Romans.

There was also a great medical school there run by the priests, and what some have called the first great psychological school in the world. There they believed they could talk you into being well. There is a tunnel there, and you can walk through it today, with holes in the ceiling every twelve to fourteen feet. The disturbed person would stop under each one of the holes, and a doctor of psychological medicine would be on top of the tunnel, psychoanalyzing this person without being seen. By the time the person got to the end of the tunnel, the disturbed person would supposedly be healed. But if they weren't quite certain that worked they could go over to the mineral baths. They boasted that anyone who came to **Pergamum** could have their problems solved. Thus, the believers there were living in a city that believed they could solve their own problems without the aide of **Yeshua**.

Pergamum was also the center of worship of Esculapius, the serpent-god of healing. Its idol was a staff with the snake curled around it. The serpent curled around a staff was the city emblem. They worshiped the snake and believed that he had the power to heal. Nonpoisonous snakes commonly roamed freely in the temple dedicated to him. Worshipers would either sleep or lay down on the temple's floor hoping to be touched by one of the snakes, symbolically Esculapius himself, and thereby be healed. Such symbolism would undoubtedly remind the body of believers of **Satan (12:9, 14-15, 20:2)**.⁷⁴ During the reign of Emperor Diocletian some believers who were stonemasons were executed for refusing to carve an image of Esculapius.⁷⁵ It was a very dangerous place to be a follower of **Christ**.

Thus, for any or all of these reasons, **Pergamum** could justifiably be called the city **where Satan** had **his throne**. It had become the greatest center of pagan worship in the world at that time. Not only that, it was also the greatest advocate of emperor worship and, therefore, provided an unusually difficult environment for a **church**.

4. The commendation: Despite the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves, there were believers **in Pergamum** who courageously maintained their faith in **Yeshua Messiah**. Because the center of Ba'al worship had shifted from Babylon to **Pergamum**, **He** commended them for remaining true to **His** name even though they lived **where Satan** had **his throne (2:13a)**. This is encouraging to us today because **Jesus** knows what you are going through. **He** knows **where you live**. **He** is omniscient and knows everything. But it's also convicting because **Christ** challenged and convicted *them* about their compromises there. **He** also knows how we compromise our faith in this world that *we* live in. **Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:13)**. **Satan** was ruling and dominating that city in a special way. In every area of life the Gospel was being opposed. This **church** was ministering where **Satan** had **his throne**, where Esculapius, the serpent, was worshiped. **Yet**, they remained faithful.

Yet you remain true to My name. Even though **Pergamum** was characterized as the seat of Satan's authority, **the church** didn't try to escape the extreme pressure. Those believers held fast to the belief that **Jesus** was **Lord**. Not Cesar as lord, not the medical school as lord, not the psychology school as lord, not the temple worship system as lord, but **Yeshua** as Lord. They knew the battleground was the deity of **Christ** and they held firm. **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 (2:13b)**. However, our faithfulness to the Gospel opens us up to satanic attack. **Satan** is trying to wear you and I down so we don't take a stand on anything. He wants our testimony to be wiped out by worldly compromise. In the midst of that hostile environment they had the courage to acknowledge **Messiah** as **Lord** publicly. Evidently a believer named **Antipas** would not compromise on that issue and **was put to death**. His name means *against all*. It probably meant that he had to take a stand *against all* satanic worship. What a wonderful thing to say about a true believer: Here is **My faithful witness**. Don't you hope that **Jesus** would say that about you?

5. The concern: Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. The problem in **the church at Ephesus** was false apostles, but the problem here was false teachers. In the first heresy, Jesus said: **You have some 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 (2:14)**. **Balaam**, in **Numbers 22-24**, was a seer of Mesopotamia. **He** was hired by **Balak**, the king of Moab, in league with the Midianites, to pronounce a prophetic curse of Isra'el. Although on four different occasions **he** tried to curse the Jews, but **ADONAI** took control of **Balak** so that on all four occasions **he** pronounced a blessing on the Jews instead. With the failure of pronouncing a curse on

Isra'el, **Balaam** used a different tactic. **He** recommended that the women of Moab and Midian entice the Jewish men sexually. Part of the enticement included the worship of their gods. The plot worked, Isra'el was cursed, and many died in a plague. The teaching of **Balaam** was encouragement of corruption by intermarriage, resulting in sexual immorality and idolatry. No doubt in the city of **Pergamum**, intermarriage with the pagan world was a real problem. Because civil and religious life were so intertwined, for believers to accept social engagements probably meant some involvement with paganism.⁷⁶

It didn't take long for the practice of worldly compromise to become a pattern in their daily life. They even ended up accepting **the Nicolaitans**. In the second heresy, **Jesus** said: **Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans (2:15)**. They were also involved in idolatry and immorality. The church at Ephesus hated the works **of the Nicolaitans (2:6)**, but **the church in Pergamum** tolerated their **teaching**. They had not yet embraced their teachings, but they had allowed them in **the church**, and the leaven was beginning to work. While the Ephesians understood how to love the sinner and *reject* the sin, **Pergamum** chose to love the sinner and *accept* the sin! It was during this period of Church history that a distinction began to emerge between the clergy and the laity with different sets of laws and regulation for each group. A priestly order was set up in the Roman Catholic Church that further corrupted it and laid the foundation for the Dark Ages.

In the age of Constantine, **the Church** became *thoroughly married* to the state, which eventually resulted in sexual immorality and idolatry. "Christianity" became the state religion and all people all over the Roman Empire were baptized into it without any regard to personal faith. As a result, a massive amount of pagans entered the Church bringing many of their pagan practices with them. Idolatry entered **the Church** as these people added Yeshua to their many others gods. It planted the seeds for what later developed into the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, those false teachers were rightly condemned for believing in the teachings **of Balaam** (Hebrew meaning *not of the people*), and **the Nicolaitans** (Greek meaning *conquering the people*).⁷⁷ The spirit of compromise has been one of the greatest evils in **the Church** ever since the days of **the** little body of believers in **Pergamum**.

It was a short distance from worldly compromise to spiritual adultery and **the church in Pergamum** was nearing that point. But we face that same dilemma today: do we change the world or does the world change us. It is tempting to try to find "loopholes" in our faith to justify becoming one of the crowd. We can excuse our behavior on a moral technicality, or try to put a positive spin on our actions, but in the end, we still have to ask whether we are compromising our faith in order to reap the passing benefits of **the world**.⁷⁸

6. The command: The church in Pergamum had compromised doctrine and morality for the sake of peace and unity. They took the love and grace of Yeshua to an extreme. **He**, therefore, offered them an opportunity to get back on the right track. The only answer for their sinful behavior was to **repent** - they needed to turn around and go in a different direction. The worldly compromise had to end and they needed to remove all false teachings from their midst. If they did not, the consequences would be dire. Jesus said He would **soon come to them and fight against them with the sword of His mouth (2:16)**. While tolerance can be a virtue, tolerating heretical teaching or sinful behavior is not a virtue but a sin. You cannot swim in the toilet and come up smelling like a rose.

7. The counsel: Jesus concludes His letter with a word of encouragement: **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches**. Yeshua appeared to **Pergamum** with a **sharp, double-edged sword** to cut through the subtle deceptions of **Satan (2:17a)**. Messiah knows that Satan's primary strategy is to chip away at our faith little by little so that over time he can **separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35)** without our even recognizing it. But **the Lord** promises that when we make right choices, rejecting the temptations of the world, we will receive heavenly riches instead - **the hidden manna** and **a white stone with a new name written on it**.

The promise to those **in Pergamum** who were martyred was strikingly unique. **To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna (2:17b)**. The Bible shows us that **God** fed Isra'el in the wilderness with **bread from heaven (Exodus 16:33; John 6:31-35)**, which was called **manna** and that a golden jar was filled with manna and put into the ark that it might be kept for future generations (Exodus 16:15 and 31). **The rabbis teach that in the third heaven "mills grind manna for the righteous" (Chagigah 12b)**. According to **Second Baruch 29:8**, in the messianic Kingdom "the treasury of manna will again descend from on high, and those alive then will eat of it." When the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, **Jeremiah (Second Maccabees 2:4-8)** or an angel (**Second Baruch 6:5-10**) rescued the ark of the Covenant with its jar filled with manna, and it is being kept for the days of the Messiah, when the LORD's people will eat it once again. **John** uses the language of such traditions to show that believers in Jesus will be admitted to the messianic Banquet, **the marriage feast of the Lamb (19:9)**.

I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it (2:17c). In the ancient world, **white** stones had a variety of uses. A **white stone** signaled acquittal by a jury, a black stone condemnation. In addition, it was a token of admission, membership or recognition.⁷⁹ People would be given **a white stone** as a symbol of their acceptance. Thus, a **white stone** points to our being found innocent of our sins because

of **His** death on the cross and our acceptance into the family of **God**. This would have been particularly comforting to those first century believers facing martyrdom.

The Greek word for **new**, *kainos*, does not mean **new** in contrast to old in time, but **new** in the sense of *becoming something different*. As believers, when we die we will *become something new* because we will exchange our bodies of corruption for resurrection bodies. Our standing before **ADONAI** cannot change because we were justified for all time at conversion. But the Bible teaches that **will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (First Corinthians 15:52)**. So this **new name** will serve as each believer's admission pass into heaven. It will uniquely reflect **God's** special love for you, if you have accepted **Him** as **Lord** of your life.

Jesus, bring your sword to cut away the subtle compromises that tie me to the empty riches of this world. I want so badly to be satisfied and nourished by You, even if the world can't recognize my success.⁸⁰ In the name of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword, amen. He is able.

The worldly believers at Pergamum picture the Church during the Age of Constantine from AD 312 to 606. Satan learned from his attack on the church of Smyrna that persecutions only caused **the Church** to flourish and continue in a perpetual state of revival. After Diocletian's unsuccessful attack on **the Church**, Constantine battled for the throne with a general named Maxentius. During the battle, Constantine, already attracted to Christianity, allegedly saw a vision of a fiery cross in the sky and heard a voice saying, "In this sign conquer." Constantine's rise to the throne was not without controversy, and it had far-reaching effects on believers during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries.

Constantine believed this vision was a message from **the Lord** that if he would embrace the Christian religion, he would be able to conquer his enemies. He supposedly accepted the Christian faith and declared himself to be its defender and protector. There are some people who accept his profession as a bona fide conversion; however, a careful examination of his life indicates that he either had a poor concept of what it meant to follow Jesus, or he had never been truly born again by the Spirit of **God**.

When Constantine became emperor of Rome, he became the virtual emperor of the Western world. As the self-styled "protector of the Christian faith," he issued an edict of toleration for Christianity and showered many favors on **the Church**. The government provided money for the operation of **the Church**, and many of the pagan temples were taken

over by believers. To please the emperor, these leaders adopted customs that were parallel to pagan practices. In fact, during the succeeding three centuries, many practices of pagan origin were adopted. One compromise led to another, and what seemed at the start to be a great blessing ended up a great curse because it robbed the true believers of their evangelistic fervor.

The influence of paganism in **the Church** increased over the years little by little, step by step. **The Church** began to shroud itself in "mystery" and ritualism that had a strong resemblance to Babylonian mysticism. The Chaldean tau, which was the elevation of a large "T" on the end of a pole, was changed to the sign of the cross. The rosary of pagan origin was introduced. Celibacy of the priest and nuns, which has no scriptural basis, found a counterpart in the chaste virgins of paganism was conceived. Here is a partial list of unscriptural changes introduced from **312 to 600**. Gradually, these changes became more prominent than the teachings of **the Church**.

- AD 312** Prayers for the dead
- AD 312** Making the sign of the cross
- AD 375** Worship of saints and angels
- AD 394** The Mass was first celebrated
- AD 431** The worship of Mary began
- AD 500** Priests began dressing differently than laity
- AD 526** Extreme use of rubbing or sprinkling oil during a religious ceremony
- AD 593** The doctrine of purgatory was introduced
- AD 600** The Mass started to be conducted in Latin
- AD 600** Prayers started to be directed at Mary

From AD 312 on, **the Church** became more and more Roman and less and less **messianic** in its practices. Before then, the movement of Yeshua was an independent collection of local **churches** working together whenever possible, but not dominated by a central authority. The name **Pergamum** literally means *thoroughly married*, and as the body of **Christ** became *thoroughly married* to the Roman Empire and elevated to a place of acceptance, it declined in spiritual blessing and power.⁸¹ In reality, it began to commit spiritual adultery. We will see this when we visit the next **church** down the road, traveling southeast to Thyatira.