

The Church in Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction

Cities are known for their slogans. New York is called “The City That Never Sleeps.” Paris is “The City of Light.” Philadelphia is “The City of Brotherly Love.” Chicago is “The Windy City.” Every city has a name it embraces—something that captures its identity and the image it wants the world to believe about it.

But in Revelation 2, Jesus gives Pergamum a name no city would ever choose for itself. He calls it “where Satan’s throne is” (Rev. 2:13). Imagine that as your city’s reputation. Not “The Pride of Asia.” Not “The Seat of Learning.” Not “The Crown of Culture.” But “The Place Where Satan Dwells.”

Pergamum was the capital of Roman Asia, a center of political authority, pagan worship, and emperor devotion. Towering above the city stood a massive altar to Zeus, a visible reminder of pagan power. The Roman governor there possessed the *ius gladii*—the “right of the sword”—authority to execute. Power, religion, and politics converged in Pergamum in a way that made allegiance to Jesus costly.

So when Christ introduces Himself as the One who has the sharp two-edged sword, He makes a bold claim: ultimate authority does not belong to Rome. The sword does not finally rest in Caesar’s hand. It rests in His. Pergamum teaches us that the church’s greatest danger is not merely persecution from outside, but compromise from within—and that even where Satan’s throne seems near, Christ still reigns.

Dangers from the Outside (v. 13)

The Christians in Pergamum faced very real dangers. To the church in Smyrna, severe persecution was coming; to the church in Pergamum, it had already arrived in the martyrdom of Antipas. Unlike many cities in the empire, Pergamum offered few places to hide from Rome, as it was the headquarters of Roman government in Asia. Michael Wilcock observed, “If Ephesus was the New York of Asia, Pergamum was its Washington, for there the Roman imperial power had its seat of government.” Devotion to emperor worship was not optional civic ritual — it was public loyalty to Rome — and for Christians, refusal came at a cost.

But Pergamum’s pressure did not come from Rome alone. The city was saturated with devotion to Zeus, Athena, Dionysos, and Asklepios — all of whom had prominent temples. The massive altar to Zeus, hailed as the god of gods, rose like a throne above the acropolis, proclaiming that

ultimate power and salvation belonged to him. Asklepios, the famed healing god, was symbolized by a serpent-entwined staff still used in medical imagery today; his worshipers sought restoration and life from him. Athena embodied wisdom and civic strength, reinforcing Pergamum's intellectual pride. Dionysos promised joy through wine, feasting, and sensual excess, blurring the line between celebration and corruption. And over all of it stood the emperor, honored as lord and savior, demanding allegiance that directly rivaled the confession that Jesus alone is Lord. Robert Mounce, in his commentary on Revelation, wrote: "...as the traveler approached Pergamum by the ancient road from the south, the actual shape of the city-hill would appear as a giant throne towering above the plain." This is probably why Jesus refers to the city as the place, "*where Satan's throne is.*"

But against Pergamum's skyline of rival saviors stands the living Christ. Zeus claimed ultimate power, but Jesus is the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth belongs. Asklepios promised healing through a serpent's symbol, but Jesus crushed the serpent's head and, as the risen Lord, conquered death, giving eternal life to all who believe. Athena embodied worldly wisdom and pride, but Christ is the wisdom of God made flesh, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Dionysos offered joy through indulgence, but Jesus gives the true bread from heaven that satisfies forever. Caesar demanded worship as lord and savior, but only Jesus shed His blood to redeem sinners and now reigns as the King of kings. Pergamum was filled with promises of power, healing, wisdom, pleasure, and security — but only the gospel delivers what these gods could only counterfeit.

Jesus commends these believers despite the immense pressure around them: "**Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith...**" They lived in a city crowded with rival saviors, yet they clung to Christ. Though we are not told the exact circumstances of Antipas' death, it is not hard to imagine how it unfolded. He likely died by the blade of a Roman sword for refusing to bend his knee to the gods of Rome or to confess Caesar as lord. He would bow to only one name — the name above every name — Jesus Christ. And it is this man, Antipas — executed by Rome, forgotten by the empire — whom Jesus calls "my faithful witness."

We know from Roman records that this was the very test Christians faced. About twenty years after Revelation was written, the governor Pliny the Younger explained that accused Christians could avoid execution by invoking the Roman gods, offering incense to Caesar, and cursing the name of Christ. Those who refused were executed. He even admitted that genuine Christians could not be compelled to curse Christ.

When Jesus praises these Christians — "**Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith**" — His words are not cheap; they are costly. To hold fast His name meant refusing to renounce it when your life was on the line. Rome took Antipas' life, but Jesus rendered the greater verdict — the very title He bears Himself: "**my faithful witness**" (see Rev. 1:5).

The kind of faithfulness Antipas demonstrated in the face of death is the same faithfulness we are all called to — whether suffering comes in the form of persecution or in circumstances beyond our control, such as illness, discouragement, or a life that did not unfold as we had hoped. Faithfulness is not measured by the kind of suffering we face, but by the Christ to whom we cling.

And we cling to Him by looking to Jesus, **“the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”** (Heb. 12:2).

Dangers from the Inside (vv. 14-15)

While the dangers from the outside were real, the greater threat was emerging from within. The Christians in Pergamum had stood firm against persecution, but they were less vigilant in confronting compromise within the church. Some adhered to the teaching of Balaam, and others to the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Though these errors shared similarities, they must be considered individually.

To grasp the true danger here, we need to recall Balaam’s actions. In Numbers 22–25, Balak, king of Moab, enlisted Balaam to curse Israel, but God turned every attempted curse into a blessing. When outright opposition failed, Balaam changed tactics. As Numbers 31:16 reveals, he counseled Moab to entice the Israelites — drawing them into idolatry and sexual immorality through seductive feasts and relationships with pagan women. What Balaam could not accomplish through direct attack, he achieved through compromise. Israel was not destroyed by an enemy from without but by corruption from within. Here is what Balaam was guilty of:

1. He lingered where God had already told him not to go.
2. He pursued recognition and reward at the expense of God’s honor and the holiness of His people.
3. He walked as close to temptation as he could without openly defying God.
4. His obedience was reluctant because his heart was drawn to what God forbade.

Balaam’s problem was not ignorance but desire. He lingered where God had already told him not to go. He pursued recognition and reward at the expense of God’s glory and the holiness of His people. He walked as close to temptation as he could without openly defying God. And though he spoke God’s words, his obedience was reluctant because his heart was drawn to what God had forbidden.

This is why Jesus references Balaam. The problem in Pergamum wasn’t an outright rejection of Christ but a willingness to tolerate compromise. Some believed they could remain committed to Jesus while engaging in behaviors God had already forbidden. Compromise rarely starts with denial—it begins when we linger where God has said “no,” chase comfort or recognition over holiness, and edge as close as possible to temptation without openly defying Him. We shouldn’t think we’re exempt; this same risk exists in every congregation—even Meadowbrooke.

Whenever we treat God's commands as optional or hover near what He prohibits, we're at risk of the compromise Jesus warns us against.

The second thing Jesus has against the church in Pergamum is that some adhered to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. As we learned from the letter to the church in Ephesus, Jesus says He hated their works (2:6). What about their teaching provoked such strong language? They promoted a compromise similar to Balaam's — the idea that one could claim to belong to God's people while participating in the very sins God had clearly forbidden. The Nicolaitans appear to have encouraged Christians to join in idolatrous feasts and sexual immorality, likely arguing that God's grace covered such behavior. In their view, holiness became flexible and obedience negotiable.

Listen, the spirit of the Nicolaitans is alive wherever Christians rationalize that blending in with culture poses no danger, that hidden sin is under control, or that God's grace permits what He has clearly condemned. If we downplay sin, treat God's commands as negotiable, or blur the boundaries between wholehearted faithfulness and self-indulgence, we risk falling into the same compromise Jesus warns against.

Why does Jesus name both Balaam and the Nicolaitans in His rebuke? Because Balaam enticed God's people into sin, and the Nicolaitans justified their continued presence in it. Those who held to these teachings were not outside the church but within it, and the ideas they embraced posed an immediate and dangerous threat to its spiritual health.

The Danger of a Greater Sword (vv. 12, 16-17)

Jesus takes the purity of His Bride seriously. The dangers from the outside were real, but all Rome was able to do with its sword was to kill and no more. The dangers within were more significant because they threatened the witness, testimony, and mission of the church.

Listen, with the martyrdom of Antipas, his witness and testimony continued. His willingness to die for his faith and to stand in the security of Christ, even in the face of death, continued to speak even beyond Antipas' death. What the early Christian apologist Tertullian wrote in 197 AD is true: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Persecution may wound the body, but it often strengthens the church. Compromise, however, weakens and destroys the church from within.

If Satan can infiltrate the church through subtle, subversive teaching — persuading believers to tolerate what God forbids and to justify what Christ condemns — then the church's witness is not martyred; it is muted. Its testimony is not silenced by force; it is weakened by concession. What Rome could not accomplish with a sword from without, false teaching seeks to achieve from within.

Jesus is madly in love with His Bride and will protect Her when She is threatened. He is also a jealous Groom and will not tolerate any force or teaching that seeks to win Her affections. This is why Jesus “hates the works of the Nicolaitans” (2:5)! The Nicolaitans offered a perverted version of the Grace that Jesus secured at the cross, teaching that the freedom they had in Christ freed them from obedience to Jesus regarding personal holiness and sexual sin. Jesus calls the Christians in this church to repent by both calling out the false teaching and standing against it.

Jesus warns this church that if they do not repent, He will come to “war against them” with the sword of His mouth. That is sobering language, but it is not unloving. It is not loving to overlook sin in your own life, nor is it loving to tolerate sin in the life of Christ’s church. This is why the Bible states in James 5:19–20, **“My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”**

Indifference to sin is not grace — it is neglect. A Savior who refuses to confront what destroys His Bride would not be loving. The sword of Christ is not the weapon of a tyrant but the discipline of a faithful Bridegroom committed to the purity of His people.

Take a close look at Jesus’ words in verse 16: **“Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”** That is not a casual warning; it is a decisive command. If they refused to turn from their sin and false teaching, it would not merely expose weakness — it would reveal they never truly belonged to Him or experienced the saving grace that brings new life. Saving grace does not leave a person at peace with sin; it creates an urgency to cling to Christ. Where Christ truly reigns, repentance follows.

Now notice verse 17. The sword is not the only thing Jesus offers. He promises that the one who has truly received Him as Savior — evidenced by firmly holding fast to His name — will be sustained and kept by Him. The true Christian is promised three things: hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name.

The manna is for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6). In a city filled with public feasts honoring false gods, Jesus promises hidden nourishment — provision the world cannot see and idols cannot give. The white stone likely referred in the Roman world to a token of admission, acquittal, or honor. But the stone Jesus gives is not temporary; it signifies divine acceptance and permanent residence in His kingdom, where there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

And on that stone is a new name — a name given by Christ Himself — belonging to the one who receives it. That new name speaks to your identity in Christ, an identity no sword, no demon, not even Satan himself can take from you. On that stone is the evidence of your redemption. Its meaning echoes the words of our Redeemer: **“You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you”** (Hos. 3:3).

Persecution may wound the church, but compromise will hollow it out. Rome's sword can threaten the body, but Christ's Word searches the heart. So hold fast to His name. Repent without delay. Refuse to justify what He condemns and to flirt with what He died to free you from. Live as those who belong to Him alone — nourished by hidden manna, accepted by His verdict, and secure in the name He has written over your life.