

PERGAMUM

Follow the north-south road from Ephesus along the Aegean Sea for about forty miles, through Smyrna, until it turned northeast, away from the sea. Follow it on into the valley of Caicus, about fifteen miles inland, and you would come upon Pergamum, the third of John's seven cities. Like Saddleback, only there was just one peak and Pergamum was built on top of it.

We are imagining ourselves at the tail end of the first century A.D. Ephesus was the thriving metropolis of the present. Smyrna was the promise of the future. Pergamum was the past. Pergamum was old and strong and did not yet realize that her day was over, that her glory was in the past. Times had changed, and what had made Pergamum great was no longer necessary or relevant. The Roman legions had marched and fought until there were no enemies of size or power within a thousand miles – and a thousand miles was a very long way away, in the first century A.D. In the new and modern world of *Pax Romana*, a city could thrive by being close to good roads and water and by being well-situated for trade and commerce. Before the Roman Empire was well-established, a city had to be a fortress. Otherwise it was a sitting duck for any band of marauders that came along. Even fifteen or twenty well-armed men, trained to fight, could be big trouble if they came along when the town was minding its normal business. What if a hundred suddenly came over the hill? There were no great cities in the ancient world that were not great fortresses. They were built in places that nature had made defensible, and then humans built them into great fortresses. And if the city was to be truly great, it must have access to water, even under siege. Jerusalem was famous for its temple, but no temple would ever have been built there had it not been for the Gihon Spring. If there was no water, the prayers would not last long. And as many a king discovered, Jerusalem was one of the hardest cities to conquer in the entire Middle East.

Just so, Pergamum had become great in the old days when a city had to be able to stand alone against all comers. The Greek *Pergamum* means “citadel, fortress,” and Pergamum was more than able to live up to its name. Pergamum sat on top of a massive rock hill that rose a thousand feet above the valley, its walls crowning the already-formidable heights of the hill. If you sit on even just the broken-down lower walls of Pergamum

today, it is almost impossible to imagine anybody stupid enough to try to attack her.

Pergamum remembered the past – the heroes of the past, the battles of the past, the gods of the battles of the past. The great altar of Zeus in Pergamum depicted the gods of Greece in victorious combat against the giants of the earth (civilization over barbarism). It commemorated the victory of Attalus – the king of Pergamum long ago, and the first ruler in all Asia to refuse tribute to the plundering Gauls (250 B.C.). Pergamum looked back to Attalus as some of us look back to George Washington: founder of a new nation and a new way of life.

Back in the “olden days” – when men were men, and heroes strove for glory or death – Pergamum had been the most distinguished city of Asia. It was still the official capital of Asia when John wrote. The proconsul of the entire province lived there, and the courts and records and machinery of Roman rule were still based in Pergamum. But Pergamum could no longer compete with Ephesus or Smyrna in population, commerce, or economic importance. Soon (in another thirty-five years) Pergamum would lose its distinction as capital and center of the Roman government in the province. It would no longer be worth the extra effort – and half a day’s time – to march everything up and down the great hill, when a city could be just as safe at the foot of the hill as up on top behind the great walls. The whole region was already safe and well-protected by the vast network of Roman legions. So Pergamum remembered the past, gloried in its past glory, and pretended it was still necessary and important.

Aside from its great prestige and endless victories, Pergamum was proud of its library. It was the greatest library in all Asia. It boasted two hundred thousand scrolls, or books. One of the great libraries of the ancient world, it rivaled even Alexandria. Libraries were mysterious, powerful, and honored institutions in the ancient world. Hard for us to fully imagine. Librarians were the honored sages – the wise men of their time. A city might boast of its librarian almost as much as its king. This was before the days of paperbacks, if you can imagine ... unless, of course, you consider a scroll to be a paperback. It depends on what it is made of, I suppose. In any case, every “book” was hand-copied and immensely precious and expensive. I complain about having to spend twenty dollars for a paperback today that I could have bought for a dollar or two thirty years ago. But in the ancient world, a collection of fifteen books was a

huge fortune. Almost no individual had that many books. Knowledge and information were exceedingly precious commodities. In John's day, if you had as many scrolls as most of *you* have books, you were immensely wealthy. Why does it take ten men to form a synagogue? You have to pool resources in order to buy your first scroll – Torah.

Yes, I am leading up to a story. Egypt had developed papyrus, which is made from the pith of a bulrush. That was the paper of the ancient world. Papyrus became the writing material of all the ancient world and one of Egypt's most important export items. Egypt's best library, at Alexandria, was the most famous learning center in the entire ancient world. Its most famous librarian was Aristophanes. This was back when Pergamum was also great, around 260 B.C.

Well, Eumenes, king of Pergamum, tried to entice Aristophanes to come and be the librarian at Pergamum. Ptolemy II, king of Egypt at the time, moved Aristophanes and his office into prison just to make sure nobody could steal him and that he did not succumb to temptation. (They had a different approach to advancement and free enterprise in those days.) Then Ptolemy II made a mistake. To punish Pergamum for its impertinence, he banned the shipment of papyrus to Pergamum. That would teach them! Pretty soon the library at Pergamum would be out-of-date and of no account. No papyrus – no new books. The ancient world's notion of an oil embargo.

But it backfired. Eumenes offered huge rewards to anyone who could come up with a substitute for papyrus – anything suitable to write on. So Pergamum developed parchment, made from the skin of animals, and most folk soon concluded that it was far superior to papyrus. The word *parchment* means “the sheet of Pergamos.” And by the way, Eumenes is another name for Attalus.

Incidentally, the most famous and best-loved god of Pergamum was Aesculapius, the god of healing. Pergamum was the healing shrine – the Lourdes – of the ancient world. You can still see his symbol – a snake winding around a sacred staff – used as the standard symbol of medical associations worldwide. The title for Aesculapius was “Savior.” But Christians had a notion of who deserved that title even more.

It just sounds like mild invective to us, but John is serious when he writes that Pergamum was where Satan was enthroned – where Satan had his home. It was worse than Smyrna. Roman rule and authority in

Asia were based in Pergamum, the ancient capital. The first temple of the Imperial Cult (emperor worship) in Asia had been built in Pergamum in 29 A.D. (in honor of Rome and Augustus Caesar). Most enemies of the state arrested in Asia would be sent to Pergamum. You might be arrested in Smyrna, but you would be sent to Pergamum for trial and, if found guilty, execution. The proconsul at Pergamum had authority – the power of life and death – over anyone in the realm, as symbolized by the Roman sword: a two-edged sword. Christians would die in many places, but if they were arrested in Asia, most of them would die in Pergamum.

The first to die was Antipas, an early Christian martyr. His name became officially linked with cases of Christians deserving death. Under the Emperor Diocletian (one hundred years after Antipas' death), Christian stonecutters from Rome, working in the quarries of Pannonia, refused to carve an image of Aesculapius and were put to death for being followers of Antipas of Pergamum. John refers to Antipas as well, whose case had become the established precedent for Roman law in cases against Christians. What Rome did not figure on was that Antipas would also become the precedent for Christians to refuse to worship the emperor as a god.

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“These are the words of the One who has the sharp two-edged sword” It suddenly becomes clear why John has chosen that particular phrase to begin his letter to the Christians at Pergamum. Roman steel is mighty indeed, and mighty scary. But Christ also carries a two-edged sword: The Word. The Word of God's love and mercy, and of an eternal Kingdom. And the sword of God's Word will spread and bring light, hope, redemption, and spiritual awakening. And in the end, Roman steel will be no match for it. At the time John wrote The Revelation, this must have seemed, even to many Christians, like sheer and silly wishful thinking. But it turned out to be history. Between 312 and 325 A.D., it was clear that the Roman Empire had fallen to the sword of Christ. But it was not a sword that spilled blood. As the Book of Hebrews proclaims, it is a sword that cuts to the heart and soul within – and converts.

Until then, however, the proconsul of the province of Asia has the two-edged sword of Rome. In his hands, it is the right of life or death over any individual. So John begins his letter to Pergamum by reminding the church of ONE who has an even greater sword, and more authority over

life and death than the entire Roman Empire could possibly imagine. This is not a new idea to Christians. “*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.*” (Matthew 10:28) There is no freedom for any of us as long as we fear physical death. Sometimes we forget. And when we do, we get frantic. Then we end up living under all kinds of pressures and for all kinds of purposes that we never intended to let be part of our living or our striving. You are baptized into death. You have accepted and experienced it. You have died with Christ. Death – and all its power plays – can no longer influence or control you. What marvelous freedom!

“*I know where you live, it is the place where Satan has his throne.*” The whole city of Pergamum looks like a great throne rising out of the valley. And John makes it clear that he is no Pollyanna. The church at Pergamum is living on top of its own death warrant. Roman authority is everywhere. “*I know where you live.*” Well, says John, let’s begin by getting our perspective straight: Which throne do we care about, and whose authority do we really trust and believe in?

Even more interesting to me, though maybe not as important, is the realization that John has now clearly linked the Roman Empire with Satan. Rome is the enemy! The military, political, and economic might that is the Roman Empire – and all of its systems and structures, though they control the world – in John’s view are all tools of Satan. No surprise to us perhaps, but in John’s day this was brash and bold. No beating around the bush, no equivocation. Rome is the enemy. Paul never thought of Rome as the enemy. He had died about thirty-five years earlier, still encouraging Christians to respect and obey Roman rule. The Revelation honors Paul’s teachings in many ways, but it breaks dramatically at this point. Maybe Rome used to be great and did a lot of good at one time, but now she thinks she is God, and her emperors think they can usurp the place of God, and so more and more evil flows from her. It had happened in Egypt and Babylon and Assyria. Now it had infected the Roman Empire: the God-complex – humans usurping the place of God. And human misery is the inevitable counterpart. The principle has been at least as much at work in the twentieth century as it ever was in the past. Do you think the principle will be repealed in the twenty-first century? In the words of Sancho Panza in *Man of la Mancha*: “Thank God I won’t be there to see.” The catch is, some people we care about will be.

The church will not try to fight Rome with physical force. It is not Christ’s way. But there can be no quarter. There can be no compromises,

no softening of the differences between them, no halfway truces. Here, at this point in history, the sword of the Gospel is against the sword of Rome. The battle lines are drawn. Only, for the Christians of John's day, these are not fighting words. These are dying words.

Smyrna and Pergamum are clearly the two toughest places for Christians to live. Smyrna because the citizens are such gung-ho Roman enthusiasts; Pergamum because that is where the courts of Rome sit and pass down sentence. Christians are complimented for holding fast to Christ's cause – for not denying their faith (probably for not burning incense to Caesar) – despite the danger and the fact that they live where the Roman government is based. Or, as John says, “where Satan's throne is.” But John (or the Spirit) is clearly worried about them. While most are being courageous and faithful, there are some among them who are teaching compromise: “Let's get along in the world we live in. Let's be realists. Surely God wants us to live. What's wrong with enjoying life a little?” And the Spirit is worried because those who are teaching such things are being tolerated. Ephesus is complimented for not allowing false teachers; at Pergamum, everybody has a right to their own opinion. There is always more than one pit to fall into. It is dangerous to begin playing games with compromise – at least with compromise that is, at its roots, unfaithful.

The story of Balaam and Balak to which John refers is found in the Book of Numbers, chapters 22-24 (and 31:8, 16). Balak was the king of Moab in the time of Moses. After Israel's successful campaigns against his neighbors (Sihon and Og), Balak became alarmed. He sent for Balaam, a famous oracle (holy man) who lived in Pethor on the Euphrates River. We hear then a fascinating story of a non-Jewish seer who rejected all of Balak's gifts and threats and continued to bless Israel and declare that she would be victorious, even predicting (24:17) the coming of David three hundred years into the future (a star). But later generations much maligned this Balaam, and they decided that he must have returned later to get money from Balak and, in exchange, advised him to instruct the Moabite women to entice the Israelite men into idolatry and other things, explaining that though he could not curse Israel, if the women could tempt them into sin, God would punish them himself – thus achieving Balak's hopes in a different way. If you cannot turn the Lord from his people, turn the people from their Lord.

Hard for us to identify with, perhaps, but Christians at the turn of the first century were having a very hard time deciding how to behave as faithful followers of Jesus in the midst of a pagan world. One of the hottest debates was about food and eating – what to eat, whom to eat with, and under what circumstances. Sharing food is always more than sharing food. People take in a lot more than food when they eat together. Meals have a way of expressing the meaning of a culture, and the faith behind that meaning. Temples, remember, were the meat markets as well as the kitchens and restaurants of the time. If you got meat from the Zeus Market (temple of Zeus) and took it home without any of the Zeus meaning in your mind or heart, then that was fine, according to Paul. But the lines were being drawn a lot tighter now. If friends invited you to dinner and they were eating the meal in full honor of Zeus, then what? And often “they” were *watching* now, to see if you were a traitor to the Emperor – that is, to see if you were a friend of the outlawed Christ. Perhaps we would all say, “So what? My religion is a private affair.” But by John’s day, many Christians were saying, “Not on your life!” There was this thing about *bearing witness* ...

One of the ways to soften persecution is to become friends with the society around you. Fear, suspicion, and persecution are not as likely against people you know by name, people you see at the same parties, people who belong to the same clubs or organizations, people you do business with. Some Christians were saying: Let’s not make things any worse than they have to be. Let’s not stand out or be more different than necessary. We have to blend in, if we expect to live and survive here. Let’s not be sticks-in-the-mud. Let’s not make people uncomfortable by making them think we feel superior or judgmental. Loosen up. Live and let live. Lots of pagans are nice people. Who are we to think we have some special truth? Tolerance, friends, tolerance! Isn’t tolerance next to love, like cleanliness is next to godliness?

The message to Pergamum is hard for us liberal Christians. For sixty years we have been concentrating on the sins of orthodoxy, without any awareness of the sins of heterodoxy. We hardly remember the word. All our focus has been on people left out, until there is nothing to be left out *of*. All our focus has been on how belief judges others, until it has become morally reprehensible to believe anything of a religious nature. Our whole culture is mightily concerned about being politically incorrect. But who cares about being spiritually incorrect? Pergamum is being warned that some among them are trying to reduce, minimize, and

smooth away all the hard and challenging realities of the Christian Life. If they do not wake up – if they let these teachings go unchallenged – they will lose it all. We can barely believe our ears. Who among us would dream of insisting that anybody ever *has* to believe anything? There is no “sword” – no WORD. The letter to Pergamum must be a dud among the seven.

But back to it: Most of the folk at Pergamum are faithful and courageous, but the Spirit is still worried. No one seems to be speaking against the tolerance faction, and does that mean the faction will convince more and more people into their way of thinking? You had better reorder your priorities, says the Spirit. The biblical word is REPENT. If you look just like the life going on all around you, maybe you *are* just like the life going on all around you. If the life going on around you is not dedicated to Christ and you are, you have a problem! Somehow, I suspect this issue did not dissolve back in 96 A.D. The letter says to the church at Pergamum, in no uncertain terms: “It is time to stop compromising with pagan ways. Do not worship idols (false goals), and do not behave in ways that maybe please your friends but do not honor your Lord.”

What do you think? Have these issues disappeared in our long march of progress? Is it still possible to find ourselves in a church like Pergamum? We have looked at three patterns; there are four more to go. What is the Spirit saying today to our church?

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The sermon has ended, but as usual we have a few “leftover” symbols to wonder about. The church at Smyrna was promised a victory wreath. They could not be touched by the second death – if they stayed faithful. What do the Pergamum Christians receive if they stay faithful? They get some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a new name written on it. Why do I have the feeling you’re not terribly impressed or excited?

Legend had it that the prophet Jeremiah had hidden the manna in a cave on Mount Nebo and that he would bring it out when the Messiah came. (Others thought the manna was hidden in the Ark of the Covenant, in a cave somewhere on Mount Sinai.) John says that Pergamum Christians are being enticed to eat food offered to idols – to

join in the banquets of Pergamene society – but that if they stay faithful, they will be eating banquets with the Messiah (Jesus had often promised it, you recall), and that *that* food is better than any meal Pergamum has ever heard of, feeding body, mind, heart, and soul. Do not settle for the fast food at McPergamum’s! It may seem enticing and important at the moment, but in a few hours, it will all be over and gone.

A white stone, called a *tessera*, was often used as a voting ballot. You could put in a black stone for “No” or a white stone for “Yes.” But no black stone is mentioned here. A *tessera* was also used as a ticket – a proof of invitation, and permission to enter. That is the more likely meaning here: The white stone will get you into the Promised Land – into Heaven. Only, a new name will be written on it. In the ancient world, a *true* NAME carried with it the essence – the true identity – of a person. You did not let your real name be known except to the most trusted of friends. Your baptized name was known only to fellow believers. But John is saying that you do not even know your own true name yet. Only Christ does. You will find out who you really are – what God truly designed you for and made you for – and it will be far more than you ever dreamed of. And that name will be written on the white stone – your invitation to eternal life.

By the way, on top of the great hill of Pergamum stood the Augustan temple. Octavian had received a new name from the Roman Senate: Augustus – Augustus Caesar. “Augustus” – the august one – was a word used only by priests, and it had never been applied to a human being before. Most people thought Octavian was the greatest man who ever lived, and they would go on thinking so for generations to come. Among other things, he was called “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” He had received a new name to match his true identity. But John is saying, “His name will pale to insignificance beside the new name you will receive if you stay faithful to Christ.”

As always, John’s excitement and enthusiasm about the Lord and what the Lord is doing come bursting through, despite all the problems and persecutions and challenges of his present time. From his place of isolation on Patmos, I do not suppose he was thinking much about getting rich or famous in this world. But he sure was turned on about something. I rather hope all of us are getting turned on by it too.