

## Seven Churches of Asia: Pergamum

1. **This lesson** will continue our study of the seven churches found in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation:
  - a. **As you will** recall from chapter one, the Apostle John received this message while living as an exile and political prisoner on the isle of Patmos; placed there because of his faith in Jesus.
  - b. John tells us in chapter 1:9-10 that it was on the Lord's day that he was in the Spirit; hearing a voice like a loud trumpet he turned to face Jesus presented in all of His glory; It was then that John was told to write down a message to send to **seven churches**: (*John's writing/Jesus message*)
  - c. **What we've seen so far**:
    - i. **Ephesus**: a church who was doctrinally sound and could not abide false teachers, was exhorted to rekindle their love for Christ so that their deeds would have proper motive
    - ii. **Smyrna**: a church who worshipped in a city devoted to Emperor worship and dealt with intense persecution. Although they had the appearance of being in great poverty, they were spiritually rich:
    - iii. **This morning we will travel** another forty miles up the coast of the Aegean Sea for the northernmost church in Asia, Pergamum.

### 1. Read 2:2-17

2. **Historical Background of Pergamum**:
  - a. Pergamum first became a truly important area during the time of the mid 500 to 300's BC. It had been a part of the **Persian Empire** until it was conquered by **Alexander the Great** in the year 334.
    - i. After the death of Alexander, the city was turned into a military base, which was then passed down through that general's Lineage. After several successive rulers in **133 BC** Pergamum was left in the last King's will to Rome. The city would continue to play an important role as it grew in

stature and was later ruled over by men like Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, and Caesar Augustus.

ii. **For our purposes** the most important part of the city's history is the devotion to idolatry: In our last lesson as we looked at Smyrna, we mentioned that so far it was the most saturated with Idols; If there was one city that eclipsed even Smyrna it was Pergamum:

1. You may have noticed the many temples that show up on the map, which is a portion of the city called the Acropolis; let's take a closer look:

b. **This is the pathway the led onto the Acropolis:** called **The Sacred Way:**

i. The first site is the city's **amphitheater**: the photograph may not do it justice, but it had a seating capacity of around 10,000 people. It would have had any number of uses, but it sat on the edge of the acropolis, in the middle of a number of pagan temples:

ii. The first such temple here is the **altar of Zeus**. Although it may not seem like it is much to look at now, during its peak this place of worship could be seen for miles around.

1. **Many students of** the Bible think that when Jesus made reference to living where Satan's throne was, that He was talking about this Temple: As the chief deity in the pantheon of Grecian gods, Zeus would have been representative of all of the immorality that system of worship had to offer:

iii. **These next two slides show us the ruins** of the temple built to the goddess Athena; This is the oldest surviving temple that can still be found in Pergamum:

1. **Athena** was supposed to be the goddess of a great many different pursuits, but she was often associated with strategic warfare and heroic pursuits; As such this temple was built to celebrate the military victories of one of Pergamum's earliest dynastic rulers.

iv. **Like Smyran, Pergamum** was a city that would also come to be known as a center of Emperor worship: in **29 BC** the first place of imperial worship

was constructed, but **It was actually write around the time that this letter was being written** that construction was begun on the temple you see now, a monument to the Emperor Trajan:

1. The city's devotion to the imperial cult would only grow over time; In the years following they would build altar's for his son, Hadrian, and later on would even go so far as to build altars to an emperor's wife:
2. In the time after this letter's writing, Pergamum would be the location for intense persecution;
  - a. **Whereas at Smyrna** the persecution came mostly from other residents of the city, the persecution at Pergamum was an intense, wide spread, government effort. Prisoners from all over Rome were taken here to be tried. An untold number of martyrs from churches all over the empire were put to death in this city.

v. **At the foot of the amphitheater was the temple to the god Dionysus**

1. Fittingly Dionysus was the god of theater, but he was perhaps more widely known for being the god of drunkenness; Technically he was the **god of wine**, but worshipping him included getting drunk with the ultimate goal of reaching a religious frenzy.

vi. **In their efforts to be all inclusive and multicultural** there was also a temple erected to the Egyptian god of the underworld, Serapis:

1. Christians in Pergamum would have frequently been recipients of invitations to come and participate in the feasts that were held in this temple.
2. As with the call to join in Emperor worship, refusal to come and participate in these would have led to a great deal of social stigma:

vii. **Finally, we have the** centers of worship for the god **Aesclepius**:

1. Aesclepius was the god of healing: The first slide shows a sacred tunnel that led into the temple. You'll notice that there are openings to let in light; but as the sick patients walked through the

tunnel there would be these “priestly doctors” that stood up above that would talk down to the patients reciting different incantations as they passed through.

2. **It is said that the worship** of Asclepius would have been particularly offensive to the Christians there because it made extensive use of snakes in both its symbols, as well as in parts of worship:
  - a. On the statue in this photo you can see the snake coiled beside the god
3. **Other bible students** have pointed out that for many early Christians, the symbol of a snake was associated with the devil’s first appearance in the garden of Eden; seeing something like this **portrayed so extensively** would have been a constant affront to the church there, as well as another possible tie in to the phrase: “where Satan’s seat is”
4. **Asclepius** was sort of a “two for one” god as the snake that he is always seen with has its own name, Propylon, and it was this snake that was supposed to give him his healing powers:

### **3. Comments on the Text:**

- a. **Vs 13)** Do we get the point that Pergamum was a thoroughly wicked city? Think about the perspective of a couple of different types of Christians who were living there:
  - i. **First**, consider any of the Jewish population that would have been converted there: Everywhere they looked was something that was completely offensive to, not just their faith in Christ, but their entire way of life that they had been brought up in:
    1. The immorality present in the city was the extreme opposite of the way God had called His people to live under the Old Law. As people who still would have followed many if not all of their Jewish traditions, it would have been a daily offense: It calls to

mind the way Peter describes Lot's stay in Sodom—a righteous soul tortured daily:

ii. **Second**, consider it from the perspective of the gentiles who had converted there: Do you think that there would have been ample temptations to participate in their old way of life?

1. I imagine that a former worshiper of idols living in Pergamum would have been like a recovering alcoholic renting an apartment above the local package store.

iii. And yet, **notice what the Lord does NOT** tell them to do:

1. He doesn't say; "this place is just too wicked, and there are just too many difficulties". He never told them to run away, or to try and isolate themselves from all of the wickedness:

**iv. What Jesus DOES do is to acknowledge that they were holding fast:**

1. Living in Pergamum would have been a difficult situation: There would have been a daily decision to make as to whether they would simply blend in and fade into the background, because standing out in the immorality might prove too risky, or they could let their light shine:

2. Jesus wanted them to be lights:

a. Brethren, in cities all over we are presented with the same choice today: Do we stand up in the immorality, or do we blend in?

b. **Vs 13b) But that isn't the only commendation** that Jesus had for the brethren there: They had kept their faith even through difficult times: We are given one name that is merely representative for a long list of martyrs at Pergamum.

i. **One early** Christian martyr was Antipas; Although we have nothing else in scripture or recorded secular history, tradition holds that like Polycarp at Smyrna, Antipas was roasted to death; only instead of being burned at the stake, he was placed inside of a statue of a bronze bull that was then set over the fire.

**1. Again; we should admire and be humbled as we see what these Christians had to face:**

**c. Vs 14)**

- i. **Unfortunately**, there were some in the church there who had made compromises in their faith, and were encouraging others to do so:
- ii. The first charge brought up was there were those who were following the doctrine of Balaam:

**1. In Numbers 22: the** Cannanite king Balak had grown frightened of the Israelites, and invited Balaam to come and pronounce a curse on Israel so that Balak wouldn't have to worry about being defeated:

- a. While God was quite adamant that Balaam shouldn't go, this prophet was tempted by the promise of riches and honor, so he repeatedly tried to find a way to convince God to let him go:
- b. When God finally told Balaam to go, every time he tried to speak a curse, God put a blessing in his mouth:

**2. Numbers 25:1-2** *Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.*

- a. While Balaam isn't mentioned by name in those verses, other areas of scripture, including here in Rev. 2, tell us that it was Balaam behind this master plan:

**3. Other passages that comment on the doctrine of Balaam**

- a. **2 Peter 2:15** *forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;*
- b. **Jude 11** *Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah.*

4. So what is the **Doctrine of Balaam**?
  - a. A good summary would seem to be, **First**, compromising the will of God is okay if the reward seems to be greater than the risk: **Second**, try and find a way to justify your actions:
  - b. Compromise and justification seem to be at the heart of Balaam's story:
5. Can we see how this would have been a struggle for the brethren there? Surrounded as they were by idolatry, threatened with persecution and social stigma, many would have felt the strong pull, of peer pressure:
  - a. Simply make the compromises you need to make, and justify it by pointing to the physical consequences if you don't.
  - b. **Again**, the lessons should be a powerful one for us: No matter how it may seem, the **risk** is always greater than the **reward**.
  - c. A moment of compromise may seem to be a moment of peace, but in truth it is sacrificing peace for eternity:

d. Vs 15)

- i. In addition to this they were said to hold to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans:
  1. This is the same doctrine that the brethren in Ephesus had so strongly opposed: While it isn't as clearly explained in the text, many bible students associate this with **Gnosticism**:
    - a. Without delving too deeply, this would have been the idea that since the flesh was temporary, any sin performed with the flesh could not harm the spirit inside which was eternal:
    - b. You can see how this would have gone nicely with the spirit of Balaam: Compromise away, what you do in these temples can't hurt your soul!
    - c. If this truly is the doctrine of the Gnostics, this would seem to be a nice place to point out how one false doctrine often goes hand in hand with another, as it looks for some kind of

support.

#### 4. Closing Remarks:

- a. **I think it is** again worthwhile to point out that they were not commanded to pack everything up and move somewhere else where it would be easier to be faithful: They are exhorted to repent and be faithful where they are!
- b. **It would seem that there are a couple of ideas** going on in verse 17:
  - i. **First** the promise of the hidden manna:
    1. You could say that this is god saying that He will provide for them like He did for Israel:
    2. But there is also a nice contrast between the temptation to join in these physical feasts to idols, and the greater fest that will be offered to those who don't compromise:
  - ii. **Second** is the promise of a white stone with a new name:
    1. Some have pointed to the practice of that day where when the verdict was pronounced by a judge, they would either present a black stone for guilty, or a white stone for innocent:
    2. The idea here would be that if they repent, the Lord will declare them to be innocent and a new person; He will not hold their sins against hem:
  - iii. Just as we share with them in their temptations, we share with the promises: