



Overview

Author: John

Date: c 95 AD

Purpose: John writes these letters to continue the pastoral care to the congregations established by St. Paul. He writes to bring the words of His vision of the exalted Jesus Christ to the churches.

Outline:
A. Vision of the Exalted Christ (Revelation 1:9-20)

- B. Letters to the Seven Churches
 - Letter to Ephesus (2:1-7)
 - Letter to Smyrna (2:8-11)
 - Letter to Pergamum (2:12-17)**
 - Letter to Thyatira (2:18-28)
 - Letter to Sardis (3:1-6)
 - Letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)
 - Letter to Laodicea (3:14-22)

Key Terms: the exalted Christ, epistle, one literal sense, 'One like a Son of Man', first love, Nicolaitan heresy, libertine, legalist, antinomian, syncretism

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Around the Word
Bible Study
Trinity, 2015

The 7 Churches of the Revelation
Revelation 2:12-17

Opening: Psalm 146

¹Praise | the LORD!*

Praise the LORD, | O my soul!

²**I will praise the LORD as long | as I live;***

I will sing praises to my God while I have my | being.

³Put not your trust in | princes,*

in a son of man, in whom there is no sal- | vation.

⁴**When his breath departs he returns | to the earth;***

on that very day his plans | perish.

⁵Blessed is he whose help is the God of | Jacob,*

whose hope is in the | LORD his God,

⁶**who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is | in them,***

who keeps faith for- | ever;

⁷who executes justice for | the oppressed,*

who gives food to the | hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸**the LORD opens the eyes | of the blind.***

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the | righteous.

⁹**The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the | fatherless,***

but the way of the wicked he brings to | ruin.

¹⁰The LORD will reign for- | ever,*

your God, O Zion, to all generations. |

Praise the LORD!

Glory be to the Father and | to the Son*

and to the Holy | Spirit;

as it was in the be- | ginning,*

is now, and will be forever. | Amen.

**Letter Three: To the Church in Pergamum
"Christ's Church in a Satanic City"**

Read Revelation 2:12-17

Christ or Satan: Competing Gods in Pergamum

2:12 "Pergamum"

+ Pergamum (or, 'Pergamon') was a city about 50 miles northwest of Smyrna. It was a city of great renown. It had been a capital of the province of Asia (before Ephesus became the capital). The city had a great library. The city was most well-known for its altars and temples. It was a very religious city. Four religious cults were centered here: Zeus, Athene, Dionysos, and Asklepios (Brighton, *Revelation*, 74).

+ Pergamum was sought in demand as a healing

center with its school of medicine (Brighton, 74). It was called the "Lourdes of the Province of Asia" for its medical reputation (Brighton, 74). The Roman physician Galen (129-200 AD) would later be born in Pergamum and raise the medical reputation of the city. A contemporary parallel to Pergamum might be the Mayo Clinic of Rochester, MN.

+ The great danger to the Christians was that the imperial cult had been introduced in Pergamum in 29 BC with a temple to the divine Augustus and the goddess of Rome. Pergamum became home to emperor worship (cf. Brighton, 74-75).

2:12 "The words of Him who has the sharp two-edged sword."

+ Jesus' words stand in sharp contrast to the religious culture of Pergamum. He is the true Monarch who rules over gods and men alike. In contrast to the sword of power, wielded by the Roman emperor, Jesus has divine authority. His sword is the power of His Word of Law and Gospel. It is the power of the final judgment.

2:13 "where you dwell, where Satan's throne is."

+ Jesus sees the Church at Pergamum as it is surrounded by the temples to Zeus and the patroness Athene and Dionysios. "Satan's throne" may refer to the great temple to Zeus. The shrine of Asklepios (a 'savior' or serpent-god) brought many to Pergamum (Brighton, 74) in search of healing. Jesus sees even the imperial cult. Certainly Satanic influence was wielded through all the idolatrous worship.

+ What are the competing 'gods' in your area? (Remember Luther's definition of a god in the Large Catechism:

"A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol" (Luther, Large Catechism, I:2).

2:13 "Antipas, my faithful witness"

+ It is likely that Antipas was an early martyr of the Church. We do not know much about him apart from this mention of him in Revelation. He was probably set apart as an example to the Christians of

what will happen if they confess Christ too loudly. Jesus praises his steadfastness in faith with the words “my faithful witness.”

Echoes of the Teaching of Balaam

2:14 “some who hold to the teaching of Balaam”

+ The teaching of Balaam goes back to the Old Testament book of Numbers (22–25). Balak was the king of Moab. He invited Balaam, a soothsayer, to curse Israel for Balak. Balaam couldn't curse that Lord's blessed people. Balaam resisted Balak. Brighton reminds us that Balaam “was nevertheless instrumental in encouraging Israel to commit immorality and idolatry with the Moabites (Numbers 25:1–5; 31:13–16, especially v.16). The teaching of Balaam was thus perpetuated in the church of Pergamum when some members were convinced to partake in the eating of forbidden foods sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality involved in the worship in the local temples. This was, in so many ways, sin against the true God. The people thought they could worship the Triune God *and* one or many gods of the city. The sin of partaking in worship of the true God *and* another god is syncretism. This syncretistic idolatry was a real threat to the faith of the Church in Pergamum.

+Are there any temptations to syncretistic worship in your area? What might be the practical benefits of syncretism in a person's life? What would be the spiritual harm of such worship?

2:15 “Some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans”

+ Brighton reminds us that “the antinomian heresy of the Nicolaitans...encouraged Christians to misuse their Christian liberty for the purpose of licentious living” (Brighton, *Revelation*, 78). Hemer points out that “there may have been a Gnostic element in Nicolaitanism, but in our primary texts it is a practical error [sexual immorality] and not Gnosticism *qua* Gnosticism” (Hemer, 94). Gnosticism was a spiritualizing of Christianity, refuted by Irenaeus.

+What ‘churches’ promote a licentious Christianity today?

2:16 “Repent”

+ Jesus calls His Pergamum Church to repent for its sins. These sins are soul-endangering and the faithful must turn away from them. The congregation needs to be purged swiftly. Jesus threatens war against those who will not stand with Christ's messenger in their midst against sin and wickedness. He is the God who speaks the eternal law to the unrepentant. He carries out the holy will of God. He is the Judge in charge of the judgment of all mankind.

Christians Live on the Hidden Manna, a White Stone, and a New Name in Christ

2:17 ‘the hidden manna’

+ The hidden manna recalls God's providential care for His people in the wilderness (Exodus 16:32–34). The ‘manna’ (Hebrew, literally,

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“what is it?”) was God's gift to His wandering people. He sustained them in their need.

+ Jesus has a safer offer to the faithful. Instead of syncretism and spiritual adultery, He calls His people to faithful worship of the true God. Instead of licentious living, He calls His people to live chastely in word and deed, and husband and wife to love one another. He gives His “hidden manna” to the saints who persevere, even when the threat is *in their own congregations*.

+ Jesus is the “Bread of Life” (John 6:35). He gives Himself through the ear as food for the soul. He bestows the gift of His body and blood on the tongue so that the Christian can have some comfort – the forgiveness of sins and the justification of the sinner – against Satan's persecution through local ‘gods’ of the temple and town hall. His ‘hidden manna’ sustains the faith and joins true believers to Jesus, as they

partake orally of His true body and blood. Beyond that, a heavenly feast awaits the faithful who abstain from the food sacrificed in the temples or to the earthly emperor.

2:17 “the white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

+ The white stone is a reference to the ancient voting practices in the courts. A juror would cast a vote for guilt or innocence “by casting black or white pebbles into an urn” (Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in their*



Local Setting,” 97).

+ Our Lord's symbolism here is rich and comforting. The white stone is nothing less than a promise of the chief doctrine of Christianity: the doctrine of justification. Your eternal Monarch, the Judge holding the two-edged sword has cast a white stone *for you*. Christ our Lord casts His vote of acquittal on your soul. You are not guilty. Your sin is forgiven. Your “new name” (v. 17) given to you in Baptism seals you against the wickedness of the world and keeps you secure against the temptations to partake in syncretistic idolatry. Your God calls you righteous and holy and good in the holy and cleansing blood of Christ.

Hymn: At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing (LSB, 663)

Image: The Great Altar from Pergamum, now held in a museum in Berlin, Germany. <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-sites/pergamon-2/>

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