Session 5 - Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamum - The church married to the world

(2: 12a) “To the angel (messenger) of the church in Pergamum write:”

Πέργαμος Pergamos = Πέρ per “Mixed” ραμος gamos “Marriage”

the city “of the serpent”

There is no written evidence of Pergamum until 399 BC when the city emerged as a power during the struggle for territorial control following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. In 301 BC, Lysimachus, one of Alexander's successors, took control of western Asia Minor. He entrusted his officer Philetaerus with control of Pergamum giving him a large amount of wealth to manage the development of Pergamum.

In 282 BC Philetaerus deserted Lysimachus siding with his rival, Seleucus. After Lysimachus was killed in battle by Seleucus and Seleucus was murdered, Philetaerus named himself king of Pergamum. The city became one of the principal centers of Greek (Hellenistic) civilization under the influence of Philetaerus and his successors, Attalus I (269-197 BC) and his son Eumenes II (197-159 BC).

Over time, the rulers of Pergamum formed an alliance with Rome, severing ties with the Greeks. Eventually the Attalid dynasty came to an end with the death of Attalus III Philometer, the last of Pergamum's kings, who died in 133 BC without an heir. Per his will the Romans assumed control of the once independent kingdom and in 129 BC, they established the Roman province of Asia by combining Ionia and the former Kingdom of Pergamum. The outcome was far from profitable for the city. The tremendous wealth accumulated by Pergamum's kings was sent to Rome. But the Romans respected the city's past as a religious and cultural center. They designated Pergamum the capital of Asia, but eventually it was supplanted by Ephesus at the time of Augustus and the birth of Jesus.

Pergamum was located 70 miles north of Smyrna and towered 1,300 feet above the plain of the Caicus River Valley. It’s library consisted of some 200,000 handwritten volumes and was second only to the Alexandrian library. Parchment was invented in Pergamum after relations with Egypt had soured and papyrus became increasingly difficult to obtain. The Pergamenes saw themselves as promoters of the Greek culture and the city was known as a great cultural and learning center.
The acropolis rises 1300 feet above the lower city located on the plain of the Caicus River.

The theater in Pergamum is the steepest in Turkey and had a seating capacity of about 10,000.

The temple of Trajan was just one of three temples built in honor of Caesar worship.

The Aesclepium (health institution) was originally constructed in the 4th century B.C. to the Greek god Aesclepius.

A model of the acropolis (upper city) of Pergamum.

The reconstructed throne of Zeus at Pergamum in Germany.

In all of Asia Minor this city was the most fanatical about Caesar worship. Caesar worship began under Augustus and the first temple built honoring this cult was in Pergamum in 27 BC. Two other temples were built honoring Trajan and Septimus Severus. Here Christians were in danger of severe persecution year round as a result of their refusal to participate in Caesar worship. As the primary religious center of Asia Minor, Pergamum also worshiped the usual pantheon of Greek gods and had temples dedicated to Athena, Asklepios, Dionysus and Zeus. In fact, Zeus is said to have been born there. The great altar stood on a foundation 125 ft by 115 ft, over 50 ft high, set in a colonnaded enclosure.
Prior to the scientific forms of medicine brought about by Hippocrates, the mystical type of medicine that was built on worship of pagan gods was in practice for eight centuries in this region. These forms of cultic healing were based on the worship of Aesculapius, the Greek god of healing. He was commonly called “savior” and was believed to have power to avert death. Originally seen as a serpent by the Anatolians, he was adopted by the Greeks as holding the staff of Hermes, the Greek god of commerce. Of course all of these legends are actually derivatives of the real account of the staff of the bronze serpent held up by Moses in Numbers.

The Church

Although Paul passed through Mysia which is the region where Pergamum was located (Acts 16:7-8), there is no record of the founding of the church at Pergamum in Acts. It was most likely founded as a result of the outreach from Ephesus (Acts 19:10) from where the gospel went out to all of Asia Minor. As noted later in the concern, this church had apparently adopted the teachings and practices of the Nicolaitans and began to merge in the pagan culture in Pergamum. Much of today’s church, specifically in western culture, exhibit these same characteristics in a failure to teach on and adhere to many fundamentals of scripture such as:

- **Jesus Christ - the only way for salvation from our sin.**
- **Moral purity and holiness in the life of the believer.**
- **The coming judgement of Christ and eternal punishment.**

Such topics are often seen as too divisive for today’s seeker-oriented and market-driven churches where man’s accomplishments and goals are the ultimate source of fulfillment.

“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and {also} its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.”

1 John 2:15-17 (NASB)
In fact Paul’s exhortation to believers is to not only be separate from the world in how we act, but in how we think:

"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, {which is} your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."
Rom 12:1-2 (NASB)

**Title of Christ**

(2: 12b) **“The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:”**

This is the first time in the letters to the churches that the title Christ uses of Himself is used in a **negative** way. The sharp two-edged sword is symbolic of His word (Heb 4:12; Eph 6:17) and it is the standard by which all men will be judged. It is by His word that the true church is cut away from the world.

**The Commendation**

(2: 13) **“I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.’**

Christ is again comforting His sheep by making them aware of His intimate knowledge of all things, including the constant pressures from sinful surroundings. So much was the proliferation of wickedness in Pergamum, that Christ refers to the city as the place “where Satan dwells” and the location of “Satan’s throne”.

There are three main views to the use of these terms.

- **The altar or throne of Zeus** who was considered the supreme of the Greek gods. Pagan worship of “the gods” is nothing more than demon worship and Satan is the highest ranking of the fallen angels and demons. Every pagan system of false god worship can be traced back to Babel and even Genesis 6. These pagan ritualistic systems of religion are all based on the lie that man can become a god through communing with the gods, no matter what it takes to get there.

- **Aesculapius** who was often depicted as a snake. Part of the ritual worship included laying down on the temple floor amongst the roaming snakes. It was believed that if a snake brushed up against any participants, they would be cleansed of sickness. Under the reign of Diocletian, refusal to carve images of the serpent meant execution.

- **Emperor worship** denied that Christ is Lord and such devotion to a mere created, fallen man is the ultimate blasphemy in the eyes of God who knows that Satan is the driving force behind this great deception.
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In any case Pergamum represented all of the deception and wickedness that is constantly a part of this world’s system headed up by Satan:

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”  2 Cor 4:4 (NASB)

The most important thing is to understand that Satan is our very real adversary, not a figure of speech. While we need not devote any time to Satan, we cannot have a proper spiritual preparation for battle without the understanding that we indeed face this very real foe and the multitudes of dark spiritual forces that work with him. Still we are told that we will have victory over his attempts to lead us astray:

“Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”  James 4:7 (NASB)

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<tr>
<th>The Names of the Adversary Found in Scripture</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Accuser of the Brethren</td>
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<td>That Old Serpent</td>
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<td>the Tempter</td>
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As the usurper of Adam’s domain, he has temporal authority (all within the sovereignty of God) over this world or “age”:

“We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”  1 John 5:19 (NASB)
The believers in Pergamum held fast to their faith even in the midst of being martyred such as in the case of Antipas. According to tradition he was shut up in a brass bull and roasted alive. Christ gives Antipas the title “My witness, My faithful one” which is also how Christ is titled (Rev 1:5; 3:14) and again comforts the believer through His reminding them of His own ministry and suffering.

**The concern**

(2:14-15)  “But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.’”

Even though the true believers in Pergamum were commended for their faithfulness, they were rebuked for what they permitted by false teachers in that same church who were causing believers and unbelievers to engage in sinfulness.

**Balaam and Balak**

Balaam was not a Jewish prophet, but was a gentile “diviner” (Josh 13:22) from Pethor of Mesopotamia (Deu 23:4-5) and apparently had some sort of regular communication with the Lord as he identifies Him that way (Num 22:8, 13, 18, 19). Balak, king of the Moabites, attempted to hire Balaam to come and curse the nation of Israel and on several occasions in which God told Balaam to refuse. Finally, God allowed Balaam to go after he continued to ask if he could go, but God was angry about it (Num 22:22). It was on the way to Balak that God lets Balaam know of His anger. After his donkey stops moving three times, Balaam beets the donkey and gets an interesting response:

“And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now." The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No." Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. The angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. "But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live." Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back." Num 22:28-34 (NASB)
Balaam proclaims to Balak that he has no power of his own to speak any curse on the nation of Israel (Num 23:28). Three times he is exhorted by Balak to speak against Israel and three times he ends up blessing Israel instead. After Balaam returns home, the next chapter of Numbers reveals that the Israelites began to mingle with the Moabites, the men being enticed by the Moabite woman and they began to worship Baal (Num 25:1-3). God’s wrath resulted in 24,000 Israelites being executed (Num 25:4-10). Apparently all of this took place as a result of the council of Balaam:

“Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.” Num 31:16 (NASB)

It is in chapter 31 that the account of the destruction of not just the Moabites, but all of the Midianites is recorded. Balaam was also slain (v.8). This council of Balaam is presented three ways in scripture:

- The “Doctrine of Balaam” Rev 2:14
  - Spiritually unchaste; marriage with the world.

- The “Way of Balaam” 2 Pet 2:15
  - Hireling = making a “market” for his gift.

- The “Error of Balaam” Jude 11
  - Sacrificing eternal riches for temporal gain.

Here the “teaching of the Nicolaitans” is included with the teaching of Balaam concerning how to make Israel stumble. Because the text states that these teachings both led to idolatry, sexual immorality and all kinds of pagan rituals, it confirms what Nicolaitinism is. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, points out the foolishness of believers mingling with the world:

"Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. "Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.”

2 Cor 6: 14-17 (NASB)

The act of participating in any form of idolatry and sexual immorality under the liberty of grace was forbidden by the early church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:29). Peter also warned believers who are “aliens” to “abstain from fleshly lusts which age war against the soul” (1 Pet 2:11).
Repentance is the only remedy for such offenses in the eyes of God. “You” and “them” includes both the perpetrators of evil and those who, although they were faithful, tolerated the sin of others who professed to be Christian’s. This is a compelling admonition for the individual believer to repent and for a church to lovingly admonish those Christian’s who are engaging in open sin. Tolerating evil for the sake of unity is never acceptable such as in the case of the believers at Corinth who were perfectly willing to let the open sin of a man persist:

"Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump {of dough?} Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are {in fact} unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” 1 Cor 5: 6-8 (NASB)

The promise to the overcomer

(2: 17)  “ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give {some} of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”

Manna was the bread provided by God supernaturally. It was what sustained them in the wilderness. It was an obvious foreshadow of Jesus Christ, the “bread of Life” (John 6:48-51). And is “hidden” from those who do not know Him.

A V.I.P. PASS from Christ

There is a significant meaning of the white stone in it’s actual historical setting. Those athletes who were winners in the games at the arena’s, were given a special white stone with their name inscribed in it. This stone was essentially a V.I.P. pass for the athletes to attend a special awards banquet held at the end of the event. He would also receive a loaf of bread. In much the same way, the overcomers have their names written down in the lambs book of life which grants them a place in the wedding feast in heaven.

The “new name” is new in a qualitative sense not in a time sense. Other than the fact that we cannot know what that name is now, we do see that it is unique to the individual and given personally by Christ Himself. This speaks of the close, personal love that Christ has for every single one of the redeemed.
It was Nimrod who founded the original Babylonian religion; virtually identical to Phaethon—or Aesculapius—eventually developing into the worship of his widow Semiramis and his posthumous son:

Semiramis & Tammuz of Babylon  
Ashtoreth & Tammus of Phoenicia  
Isis & Horus of Egypt  
Aphrodite & Eros of Greece  
Venus & Cupid of Rome  

— Alexander Hislop

When Cyrus conquered Babylon, they founded a new center at Pergamos and that king became Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of that pagan system. [Pember] Subsequent transfer of the cult from Pergamos to Rome, would lead to the appointment of successive Caesars as high priest. By 378 A.D., Damasus, the Bishop of Rome, completed the absorption of Babylonianism into the Roman Church. [Hislop & Pember]

The Roman Empire

753 B.C. Rome founded,  
343-272 B.C. Subdued Italy,  
264-146 B.C. Conquered Carthage,  
215-146 B.C. Greece, Asia Minor,  
133-31 B.C. Spain, Gaul, Briton, Teutons,  
63 B.C. Conquered Judea.

Its rise

- 46-44 B.C. Julius Caesar  
- 31-14 A.D. Augustus - Christ was born in his reign.  
- 12-37 Tiberius - Christ crucified in his reign.  
- 37-41 Caligula - Unsuccessful attempt at desecration of the Temple.  
- 41-54 Claudius  
- 54-68 Nero - Blamed his burning of Rome on Christians; executed Paul.  
- 68-69 Galba, Otho, Vitelius  
- 69-79 Vespasian - Titus destroyed Jerusalem (70)  
- 79-81 Titus  
- 81-96 Domitian - Most violent; thousands slain; John banished to Patmos.  
- 98-117 Trajan - Sought to uphold the laws; Christianity regarded illegal.  
- 117-138 Hadrian  
- 138-161 Antoninus Pius - Bar Kochba revolt; Aelia Capitolina replaces Jerusalem.  
- 161-180 Marcus Aurelius - Severest since Nero. Peak of Roman power.
The prophetic profile of Smyrna marked out the specifically harsh persecution of Christian’s over a period of two and a half centuries, under which the spread of true Christianity flourished. However the letter to the church at Pergamum opens up the door to an about face in the history of the church. What Satan cannot accomplish by way of outright attack, he accomplishes through deception and lure.

the marriage of the church to the world

- In 312 A.D. Constantine sets out to defeat his rival - Maxentius. He reportedly saw a vision of a cross with the words “in this sign thou shalt conquer”. Upon the defeat of Maxentius, he declares his conversion to Christianity.

- In 325 A.D. Constantine issues his Edict of Toleration which established the freedom of religion, favored Christians in court, exempted ministers from taxes and encouraged all citizens to become Christians.

- In 330 A.D. Constantine, fed up with the pagan idolatry in Rome, moved the capital of the empire to Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople.

Under his rule he:
- Ceased gladiator fights.
- Reduced the killing of unwanted children.
- Abolished crucifixion as a form of execution.
- Advanced Christians to high offices.
- Reduced slavery.
- Declared Sunday a day of worship.
- Assumed headship of the church.
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the unholy consumation

· 361-363 Julian, “The Apostate” sought to restore paganism.
· 363-364 Jovian reestablished the Christian religion.
· 378-395 Theodosius made Christianity the state religion and forced conversions filled the churches with unregenerates. Ambition to rule, heathenism, and pomp emerge in the world church

· Heathenism was Christianized; pagan temples became Christian churches; heathen festivals were converted into Christian ones.
· Pagan priests slipped into office as Christian priests.
· Change was mostly nomenclature

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