

## Revelation: Because the Time Is Near

### Study #5: Pergamum—the Compromising Church

Have you ever wondered how the bat became a creature of the night? Aesop, the Greek storyteller, gave his take on it. He said it happened as a result of a war between the animals. The beasts and birds were fighting for control of the earth, and the bat, being a consummate politician and not wanting to risk the disfavor of either side, decided to join both parties. When the birds were winning, he winged around with the birds. When the beasts prevailed, he walked and pretended to be a mouse. But finally, his duplicity was found out and he was rejected by both groups. So today he hides his face in shame, only daring to appear at night.

Of course, that fable wasn't intended to teach us about bats. The bat is what he is, not because of his misbehavior but because of God's design. Aesop's fable, like all his stories, was intended to teach us something about ourselves. In this case, the disgust with which we view the coward and hypocrite. If you and I believe something, we should believe it strongly enough to say so. For if we try to please everybody, chances are we'll wind up pleasing nobody, because there are few people we respect less than those who lack the courage of their convictions.

This is especially true of spiritual convictions. Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters, for he will either hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. In other words, serving Christ is a fundamental choice of masters. Joshua earlier referred to this when he demanded of God's Old Testament people, "Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

The truth is that fallen man never likes to be pinned down. Because he finds his strength in what others think about him—his family, his friends, his neighbors, his co-workers—he is always asking himself, "What will people think of me if I do this or that?" But the Bible warns that "the fear of man brings a snare." When we become too concerned about what others may think, it not only destroys our usefulness to Christ, it also enslaves us to the opinions of others.

That was the dilemma in Pergamum, the third church in our study of Revelation. Situated in a city which was hostile to Christ, the believers were left with this decision: Do I go along with the crowd and try to keep from offending those around me? Or do I ignore the peer pressure and take a stand for Jesus Christ, even if it isn't the popular thing to do? To help us understand why they made the decisions they did, but even more importantly, to help us make the right choices, there are four major facts I want to emphasize about this church. The first fact is—

#### 1. Where They Lived

The letter begins, "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write, "These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: 'I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.'" Three things stand out about this city. First, it was a strategic city. When the Roman legions conquered Pergamum, it became their provincial headquarters and the capital of Asia Minor for over 400 years. Second, it was a culturally elite city, famous for its theaters and art galleries and boasting a university with a library of 250,000 books. Third, and most important to understand, it was the devil's city. Jesus says in verse 13, "You dwell where Satan's throne is."

You say, "I thought Satan's throne was in hell?" No, the Bible teaches that Satan is "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4), not the next, and that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." (1 John 5:19) In fact, the Bible says he deploys his demons like a military commander appointing the strongest demons to ruler the greater cities and the lesser demons to rule the smaller cities. The angel Gabriel referred to this in Daniel 10:13, where he explained why he was slow in bringing the answer to Daniel's prayer. It was because the prince (or demon) of Persia resisted him and he had to wait for Michael the archangel to come to his aid. So, yes, the devil does have a kingdom, but its throne is right here in this world. In John's day, it was located in the city of Pergamum. Today is likely located in some other strategic spot.

Why did the devil choose Pergamum? Well, not only was it a capital city, it was also fertile soil for false religion. There was the strictly enforced worship of Caesar. There was the worship of Bacchus, the god of drunkenness. There was also the 100-foot altar of Zeus erected on the side of a cliff, which looked like a giant throne. But the most awful evidence of Satan's presence was the temple Asclepius, the serpent god. Its reputation as a healing center was so well promoted that people came from all over Asia hoping for a cure. The patient would enter his temple, be given hallucinatory drugs, and then be led through a tunnel filled with snakes. From openings in the walls, voices would whisper, "You will be healed. All praise to Asclepius who is healing you. Asclepius has touched your body." History reports that a few were healed, but others died of snakebites, and many emerged from the temple hopelessly insane.

You may wonder, "Where is Satan's throne today? And what kinds of demons control the city where I live?" Because they do, you know. The answer is: Only the Lord knows for sure. But I assure you: We're living in occupied territory. Drugs. False religion. Sexual perversion. The Pergamums had nothing on us! And yet, the good news is, we can be faithful, no matter how much evil we face. The devil is a liar and has convinced himself (and some of us) that this is his world, and there's nothing we can do about it. "After all, look at the hold he has on the schools, the media, the government!" But then we read Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell within it." Jesus added, "All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples...and lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the age." And suddenly we realize, it is not a hopeless battle. In fact, even if it were, it would still be worth fighting for Christ. For as someone has said, "I'd rather fail in a cause which will ultimately succeed, than succeed in a case which will ultimately fail.

***This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget  
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet!***

## **2. How They Succeeded**

Jesus continues in verse 13, "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells." In spite of their wicked surroundings, Christ was pleased with these believers for two reasons:

First, they held fast to His name. Did you know that confessing Christ's name is an essential part of salvation? Romans 10 tells us that to believe in our hearts that Jesus is Lord is a good thing, but that the proof of our salvation is whether or not we're willing to confess Him

with our mouths. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is without your mouth that you confess and are saved." There are no secret disciples, then. Jesus never called anyone to follow Him privately. Instead, He said, "Whoever confesses Me before men, him will I confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him will I deny before My Father who is in heaven."

I used to worry, "Does that mean if I get nervous and fail to confess Christ in a moment of fear, I won't go to heaven?" No, Jesus wasn't talking about a one-time denial. If that were true, no one would be saved! Peter denied his Lord three times and still found forgiveness. But if we suffer an ongoing embarrassment to be identified with Christ, we need to double-check our salvation. Because that isn't normal for a child of God. On the contrary, we ought to feel a holy pride that we belong to Jesus. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of salvation for everyone who believes."

So let me ask you. Have you taken that initial step of confessing your love for Jesus Christ by being baptized as a believer? If not, it's important that you do that as soon as possible. Many of us were christened as babies, but we didn't realize at the time what we were doing. That is why the Bible says that baptism is for those who know Jesus and have committed their lives to Him. Baptism doesn't save us. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But there is something about confessing Christ publicly that seals our salvation and makes it real.

Second, they did not deny His faith. Or to put it another way, they spoke out for Christ even when it wasn't the politically correct thing to do. Antipas is the best example. His name means "against all," symbolizing his willingness to speak out for Christ even if it meant standing alone. History says when he was brought before the statue of Caesar, he was told, "Swear that Caesar is Lord." But he refused. "Jesus is Lord and there is no other God but He." The Roman official exclaimed, "Antipas, don't you know that the whole world is against you?" To which the great man replied, "Then Antipas is against the whole world!" He was then placed inside a brass bull, which was heated with fire until he slowly roasted to death. Antipas was an obscure little man in church history. But he is the one we remember when we think of Pergamum.

And who knows? Maybe it will be the same way when we look back on the church of today. When I think of heroes, the names of Billy Graham, James Dobson, and Jim Elliot come to my mind. But is it possible that some little known saint will head the list instead? The girl who stands up in her classroom and politely says, "Teacher, I don't believe we came from monkeys. I believe God created us." Or the young man who stands up among his friends and says, "You bet I go to church, and I'm proud of it. Why not come with me?" Or the single mother who says to her children, "Yes, I know everyone else is doing it. But this is a Christian family and we're going to please the Lord!" Those are the real heroes among us. Those who are willing to risk the wrath of the crowd and say, "No," even when the rest of the world is saying, "Yes."

Courage. That's what we need more of today. Winston Churchill put it like this, "Without courage, all other virtues lose their meaning." He was right! The reason we American Christians have had so little impact on our modern society is because we fail to add to all our other virtues the courage to stand up for what is right. We've seen where they lived and how they succeeded. Unfortunately, their success did not last. Let's see why.

### 3. Why They Faltered

The Lord continues in verse 14, “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.”

Jesus cited two acts of disloyalty by this church. First, **they tolerated the Nicolaitans.** Who were the Nicolaitans? The word comes from two words—*niko* meaning “to conquer” and *laos* meaning “the people.” It was a heresy in which the leaders of the church began to act as lords over the congregation, taking on powers and privileges which God never intended. In fact, many scholars believe this is when the non-biblical distinction between clergy and laity began, the leaders creating a hierarchy of deacons, elders, pastors, and bishops. But the Bible is clear. The ground is level at the foot of the cross, we are all brothers and sisters in the family of God, and though there are offices in the church, leaders are to be humble examples to the flock, not lords over the congregation. (1 Pet. 5:3) Therefore, Jesus said to them, “This thing I hate!”

Why did Jesus use such strong words? Because of two dangers. They were robbing God’s people of the opportunity to use their spiritual gifts under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. You see, there are some pastors who give their people the impression that “you cannot serve the Lord in this church unless I give you my permission.” And that’s wrong! After all, whose church is it? Not mine or yours. It belongs to Jesus. He purchased it with His own blood. Therefore, pastors and elders can give you advise, and if you’re a Spirit-led person, you will listen to their counsel. But the permission and authority to do ministry in the church comes directly from Jesus Christ through the leading of the Holy Spirit, not any human leader.

The second danger of this heresy is that it lets God’s people shift their responsibilities to the professional staff. “After all, Pastor, that’s what we pay you to do. Besides, you’re better at it than we are—the counseling, the confronting, the visiting, the evangelizing, the organizing. I have a good theological words for that—Baloney! That’s not why you pay your pastor or others on the ministerial staff. Ephesians 4:12 says the reason Christ gave pastors and teachers to His church was “to equip the saints for the work of the ministry.” In other words, pastors exist not to do your work for you, but to help you do your work better. In fact, other than preaching and making the most difficult decisions facing the church, I am hard-pressed to think of one other job in the church that only the “clergy” can do. I believe the saints can be trained to do it all!

**The second evil they tolerated was the doctrine of Balaam.** Who was Balaam? He was a powerful and demonically-inspired false prophet who was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the people of Israel. Three times he tried to do so, but each time God stopped him—once by speaking to him through the mouth of a donkey. So when “Plan A” failed, he turned to “Plan B.” He advised the Moabites to send their daughters to intermarry with the Israelites. By doing so, he accomplished two things: 1) He made the Israelites hesitant to fight the Moabites, since they were now their in-laws. 2) He ate away at the moral core of Israel by introducing idolatry and immorality to their homes. The Israelite men married the beautiful daughters of Moab and began to accept their false religion and the immoral practices that went with it. What Satan failed to do through cursing, he very quickly achieved through compromise.

Nor have his tactics changed. As they say, “If it ain’t broke, why fix it?” So, in Pergamum, when persecution didn’t work, he began to raise up leaders who assured the people, “It doesn’t matter who your friends are as long as you love Jesus!” So, while continuing to speak out for Christ, they began to form wrong relationships—Christians marrying non-Christians, believers becoming business partners with unbelievers, and God’s people visiting the temples of idols.

What about you? Have you let the world, the flesh, and the devil worm their way into your life? I talked to a Christian couple some time ago who innocently entered into a business partnership with an unbeliever—a very nice unbeliever—and then spent the next three years trying to get out of it without losing their shirts as a result of all the unethical decisions he was making. Or perhaps you’re viewing movies and television programming that have no place in a Christian home. Or maybe you’re letting your children or grandchildren spend time and money on video games that do not please the Lord. Last but not least, I warn young adults and your parents that according to 2 Corinthians 6:14, it is not permissible for Christians to date non-Christians. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”

But you say, “I only want to date him, not marry him!” Perhaps so. But the fact is, you don’t marry someone you haven’t dated. And having watched the pattern develop from start to finish dozens and dozens of times, I can tell you it almost always ends in sorrow. Typically, the girl says to herself, “I’ll date him until I can lead him to Christ, and only then will I marry him.” But rarely does that happen. Rarely does the unbeliever make a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ. He may say he has, because the girl is attractive and he wants the benefits of a Christian wife. But rarely does the believer lift the unbeliever up to her level of morality. The lesson of Balaam is that we’re usually pulled down to their level of immorality. So, parents, teach your children to trust the Lord not only for their salvation, but also for His choice of a soul-mate.

I’m the last person in the world who wants to keep you from making friends with unbelievers. After all, that’s how we lead them to Christ. But there is a huge difference between being friendly toward unbelievers and forming unequal partnerships with them. And that’s what we need to avoid. Because that was and is the doctrine of Balaam.

We’ve learned where they lived, how they succeeded, and why they faltered. Now notice a final fact with me. Notice—

#### **4. What They Risked**

First, **they risked judgment**. Jesus continues in verse 16, “Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” Did you notice the two different pronouns Jesus used? Two groups are being addressed in this verse—you and them.

Who are the “**them**” in this verse? False teachers who like Balaam were leading God’s people into sin. How do we know? Because of how they are punished—with the sword of His mouth. This is a reference not to the small sword used by Roman soldiers in hand-to-hand combat, but to the large two-handed sword used to decapitate the leader of an enemy army. It speaks of Jesus’ complete and everlasting victory over all of His enemies.

Christians are often gullible. The moment someone claims to be a Christian, we say to ourselves, "Well, then, he must be OK?" What we forget is that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light to deceive us. Then when they begin to teach things contrary to the Bible or form their own little following, we give them the benefit of the doubt, "He's just a misguided Christian who has gotten off the track." Not so! 1 John 2:19 explains, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they are not all of us."

The second group is identified by the word "**you.**" Who does this refer to? Backslidden Christians who are giving aid and comfort to the enemy. And the warning of Jesus is: Come out from among them and be separate, or "I will come to you quickly!" This isn't a reference to the Second Coming, but to Christ stepping into the midst of His church and exacting judgment. You say, "Would God really judge His children?" Absolutely! Not for the purpose of condemnation. Romans 8:1 assures us, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." But God does discipline us so we don't continue to put ourselves into evil circumstances that would merit us being condemned along with the world. (See 1 Cor. 11:32.)

The story is told of a farmer who was bothered by crows eating his young corn. So he loaded up his shotgun and crawled along the bottom of his fence, hoping to get a shot at them. Unfortunately, he also had a very sociable parrot who, hearing the noise of the birds, decided to join them in the garden. BOOM! BOOM! The farmer pulled the trigger. Climbing over the fence, what did he find lying on the ground next to the dead crows? His pet, badly ruffled with a broken wing, but alive! Gently carrying it up to the house, his little girl tearfully asked, "Daddy, what happened to Polly?" Before he could reply, the parrot spoke up, "Bad company! Bad company!" For as 1 Corinthians 15:33 warns, "Bad company corrupts good morals."

Not only does He allow us to suffer the natural consequences of our sins, Jesus also reminds us, "There are rewards to be lost, if we do not repent." The letter closes like this, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the white stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."

The "hidden manna" refers to the soul-satisfying fellowship found in Jesus, the Bread of Life. Just as the Israelites enjoyed bread from heaven, so you and I can find everything our souls long for in Jesus Christ. Why is He called the "hidden manna?" Because fellowship with Him is something the world knows nothing about.

I remember a phone call I received shortly after I became a Christian. A friend called me on Friday night and asked me, "Want to go drinking tonight?" "No," I said, "I don't think so." He said, "Well, then why don't we go to the drive-in theater and see if we can pick up some girls?" "No," I said, "I don't want to do that either." Then he mentioned a few other possibilities, and each time I said, "No, I can't. I belong to Jesus Christ now, and it wouldn't be pleasing to Him." So, finally, in frustration he asked me, "Then what in the world do you do for fun now?" And I remember at the time I really didn't have a good answer for him, because I was new at being a Christian. But even if I'd had an answer, I doubt he would have understood. Why? Because the joy we experience as Christians makes no sense to the world. They're looking for a happiness based on happenings, when in fact the greatest joy of all simply comes from knowing Him.

And not only is there soul-satisfying joy at the present time, the “white stone” reminds us of the special places of honor reserved for us in His kingdom. In ancient times, the Romans rewarded their athletes by giving them white stones with their names written on them, which served as entrance passes to the feasts that were held after the games. So, combined with the hidden manna mentioned above, I believe this is a reference to the special places of honor we will enjoy at that future feast called the marriage supper of the Lamb.

So ask yourself before we finish. How clean is my life before the Lord? Have I shown the courage to be in the world but not of it? Or am tolerating things the Lord hates? Remember:

***All the water in the world, however hard it tried,  
Could never sink a sailing ship, unless it got inside.  
All the evil in the world, the wickedness and sin,  
Can never sink your soul's craft, unless you let it in!***