

20230412 First-Class Courage? Revelation 2:12-16 (To the Church in Pergamum)



¹² "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Pergamum means "of first-class courage."¹ It was a significant city for much of its history. It was rich with many pagan temples and was the center for worshiping Asclepius (god of healing symbolized by a snake). We can imagine there was much money-making going on there as people from all over the world would go there searching for a cure for whatever was ailing them. It's no stretch to think of all the trickery and deception which accompanied the "faith healers" that operated there. It makes me think of how we call false cures "snake oil," and Pergamum was the treatment center where such cures were sold.

In Pergamum, there was a lot of temptation and influence from paganism in general. Jesus tells the church there that He knows exactly where they are. Jesus is just saying that I know this is a city filled with the many distractions of the world, and most in the city were devotees of these pagan practices. Jesus says, even though it's filled with the things of Satan, this group of believers has held fast to the name of the Lord. We must remember that names were significant, which means that they have held fast to all that was included in His nature, purpose, and ministry. And He praises them, saying, despite being in the midst of all that, "You did not renounce your faith." That's such a sweet word for each of us. We are in a culture that has become very paganistic in many ways. There are just so many attractions and distractions for us. People worship beauty, youth, sexual pleasure, wealth-making, accumulation, etc. Can we, as the Church, live in that? Yes, we can, but it is not easy. Jesus is telling them that they have remained true to His name.

Jesus then mentions a person named Antipas, who was killed because of his devotion to Christ. The traditional accounts say Antipas was martyred during the reign of Nero (54-68) or Domitian by burning in a brazen bull-shaped altar for casting out demons

¹ <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Pergamum.html>

worshiped by the local population.² We've never seen such things happen in America, but it could happen someday. As secular society increasingly worships the religion they've created, Christians will be targeted for not embracing those "religions ." I call them religions because they are causes to which the world dedicates itself and its resources. Jesus says, even in the midst of all of that influence, "You stayed the course."

¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

So let's try to think about the "teaching of Balaam" and the "teaching of the Nicolaitans ." In Numbers, chapters 22-24, we read an account of a man named Balaam. He was a seer, the King of Moab, hired to curse the Israelites. Balak, the king of Moab, didn't want Israel passing through Moab, so he set about hiring Balaam to curse Israel. Every time Balaam tried to curse Israel, blessings came out. Finally, Balaam hatched a scheme to import young seductive Moabite women with their sexual cult worship to corrupt the men of Israel (Numbers 25). Balaam brought a curse on Israel through the back door, and he did it for money.

Jesus says to those in Pergumum that some in the church were doing the same thing. They were betraying the church for their own gain. They were bringing the teachings of the world into their church for their own selfish purposes. Jesus brings it up because it only takes a little leaven to leaven the whole lump of dough. In the Bible, yeast is an image of sin; a little sin can get into the Body of Christ and affect everything. I think the message is that Satan can get into the back door of our church and our lives by tempting us indirectly.

Maybe an example of us following the way of Balaam is when we mistakenly believe that we can live as the world lives, admire what the world admires, and desire what the world tells us will make us happy and somehow still serve God. It just doesn't happen. When we're too wrapped up in the world, we invite the world into us. We need to guard our distance from the world carefully. We need to be very aware and alert so that we do not get sucked into the world's priorities. So, how can you know if you've gone the way of Balaam?

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antipas_of_Pergamum

The Historical-Prophetic View of the 7 Churches

Ephesus—Apostolic church (AD30-100)
Smyrna—Persecuted church (AD100-313)
Pergamum—State church (AD313-590)
Thyatira—Papal church (AD590-1517)
Sardis—Reformed church (AD1517-1730)
Philadelphia—Missionary church (AD1730-1900)
Laodicea—Apostate church (AD1900-)

If you're in a crowd of unbelievers indistinguishable as a Christian, you're very near to the way of Balaam. We are called to be "separate and holy" (Leviticus 20:26; 1 Peter 1:2). Being separate and holy aren't just words. It means we're separated and holy. We are

different. We are His people. To resist all that is to have first-class courage like the church in Pergamum.

The central theme to the "way of Balaam" is that "a little sin" doesn't hurt (Galatians 5:9), especially if there's some personal or even financial benefit involved (1 Timothy 6:5). This describes the person that keeps their faith hidden to be accepted, to be popular, to receive a promotion, or just get along with others. We don't need to be offensive unnecessarily, but we should NEVER eschew being the salt and the light to the world around us. We should never totally shun the presence of sinners or unbelievers (Luke 7:34; 1 Cor 5:9-13), but we are commanded to stand up for the truth (Ephesians 4:25). The Church of Pergamum wanted to be worldly and at the same time be spiritual. Whenever this happens, the world wins out. Scholars aren't sure, but most believe the "teaching of the Nicolaitans" was an abuse of grace. It was folks doing whatever they wanted to do morally and sexually, and they just claimed it was "covered in grace."

¹⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

Jesus makes a final promise to those believers in Pergamum. It is a promise to give three things to the overcomers: 1) hidden manna, 2) a white stone, and 3) a new name on that stone.

Jesus is the "Bread of Life." Not only that, He promises us divine provision when He says, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you (Matthew 6:33)." It is hidden because the world cannot recognize it or partake in it. Whenever we stand firm and abide in Christ, He promises us the "hidden manna." I think the "hidden manna" is that supernatural provision that God promises us. Remember the words of Jesus, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled (Matthew 5:6)." Jesus promises to give us what our hungry and thirsty souls need to be filled.

A white stone was used in ancient times as an ID card. Sometimes it was given out at an athletic event to the winner. It conferred special privileges onto the holder of the stone. Likewise, if you were invited to a home for dinner, your name would be written on a white stone and placed where you would be seated. It is a symbol of intimacy and invitation with privileges that went along with that. Jesus promises an invitation to each and every believer. We certainly know that we will all be invited to the marriage feast of the lamb. But I think there's something even more in this. If we take the passage in its simplest form, Jesus will give each of us a "new name," His name for us. It is sort of like when a husband has a special name for his bride that only he uses. Jesus has a new name for each of us that is His special intimate name for us. That new name will perfectly describe us in terms of who we were meant to be in His creation and kingdom. This is merely my conjecture, but I think we'll each have an intimate relationship with Him. How that all happens, I have no idea. It is part of the mysteries of God.

Let us pray.