

Letter to Pergamum
Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction

5 miles north of Smyrna was Pergamum, the ancient official capital city of Asia. It still survives, with a population of 14,000. It is a new great commercial centre, but it also has great historical interest. It owned a famous library of 200,000 books, every book written and copied by hand, second only to the unique library of Alexandria in Egypt. It was the centre of culture; indeed the word "parchment" was derived from Pergamum. In the ancient world, parchment was called the Pergamene sheet. It was made from animal skins, smoothed and polished, and it was superior to papyrus.

But more interesting and sinister is the fact that Pergamum was known as Satan's throne or Satan's seat. **You live where Satan has his throne** (Revelation 2:13). It was a place of satanic activity. Heathen temples were everywhere, and heathen worship was seen constantly. It was the last outpost of Greek civilization before the wild territories of hinterland; therefore Greek gods were carefully worshipped. Behind the city was a conical hill dotted with temples and shrines of countless gods. The Temple to Zeus was filled with the smoke of sacrifices. Asclepius, the god of healing, had a temple there, and he was given the title of Saviour. People came from all over the world to be healed of their pains and diseases.

As in Smyrna, Emperor worship was also strong in Pergamum. So there were many reasons why the city earned itself the name "throne of Satan". He had free rein there, and Christians were particularly vulnerable. The temptations were strong, and there was the permanent threat of death. Already one church member, Antipas, had been martyred. When they thought of how few in number they were, how powerful the evil around them was, how dangerous the situation, the Christians must have longed to pack their bags and go to a pleasanter place. But they could not, for this was where they lived.

We are called to be Christians wherever God has put us. To conquer and not escape is the Christian principle. We are to stay where He wants us, to be witnesses, salt and light in a dark place, and He will sustain us in that place. So it was for the church at Pergamum. Pergamum was a place where a battle was being fought between God and the Devil, Christ and Anti-Christ, truth and error, holiness and sin in all forms.

The Head of the Church was concerned that in Pergamum, the truth should be known, preserved and spread. If the theme of the letter to Ephesus was we must love Him, and the theme of the letter to Smyrna was we must suffer for Him, the theme of this letter is that we must hold fast to the truth about Him.

The importance of the truth

The church is commended - **You remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me** (Revelation 2:13). The truth of the Gospel is to be faithfully guarded. We must hold together love and truth. Some make so much of love that they

forget the importance of truth. “Let’s drown doctrine in a sea of brotherly love.” Others are so passionate for the truth that they are hard and bitter and unloving. Love is sentimental if not strengthened by the truth. Truth is hard if not tempered with love. **Speaking the truth in love** (Ephesians 4:15). **Your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight** (Philippians 1:9).

To those who say it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere, remember these things about the Lord Jesus - **I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me** (John 14:6); **I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life** (John 8:12). There may be secondary matters on which there can be differences in interpretation, e.g. details of the Lord’s return, matters of church governance. But certain matters are non-negotiable. To give way is to give up the Gospel. “Unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, in all things charity.” Sadly, especially in ecumenical circles, the reverse is seen too often – central issues are minimized, and secondary and trivial issues are magnified.

Two things are singled out here by God. The first is “My name”. This stands for God Himself – who Christ is and what He has done. This is the emphasis of evangelicalism because it is the emphasis of the New Testament. We should not be concerned to commend a certain church, particular services, philosophies of life, and views about the end of the world. Instead, the person of Christ should be our central concern. He must be revealed as truly God and truly man, and what He did on the Cross to save sinners needs to be told. His death is the only ground of salvation.

The second thing singled out is “your faith in me”. Their conviction led to commitment. They had made Him their own. He was their personal Saviour and personal Lord. We cannot compromise here without surrendering the whole New Testament. Antipas was martyred because he did not give way here, and earned himself the honour of being described by Christ as **my faithful witness** (Revelation 2:13). We do not know any more about him, other than that he had the grace to stand firm and not deny these two vital matters.

It is our duty to be uncompromising on these things – though lovingly so. **If we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned** (Galatians 1:8). **Contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints** (Jude 3).

The truth must be accompanied by holiness

True Christian faith which is based on Christ is always accompanied by holiness. We are not saved by good works, but for good works. The New Testament condemns false doctrine, and also false living. John’s first epistle tells us that true rebirth is true faith in Christ and practice of righteousness. Christians must walk in truth and in godliness. **Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ** (1 John 2:22). And yet, **The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him** (1 John 2:4).

The complaint against the church at Pergamum was that it was harbouring in the midst those who were holding to the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the

Nicolaitans. Balaam had caused Israel to engage in idolatry and immorality (Numbers 25, & 31:16). And the Nicolaitans had an evil influence on the church. They taught that if man was saved and under grace, he could live as he liked. There was concern that this church was letting this carry on, and was not exercising discipline. They are warned to repent or else God would come in judgement. **Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth** (Revelation 2:16).

How often the New Testament makes it clear to us that there needs to be right belief and right behaviour, correct creed and correct conduct, Christ as Saviour and Christ as Lord. We are saved by grace, and saved to be gracious. Charles Simeon, the famous evangelical clergyman in Cambridge who pioneered the evangelical cause in universities, had three aims in his ministry (1) exalt the Saviour, (2) humble the sinner, and (3) promote holiness in life.

Truth shall triumph over error

The church at Pergamum was not dealing with sin, and it was called to repent and face up to its responsibility. There was a promised reward for obedience. God described Himself as **Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword** (Revelation 2:12). The sword is a symbol of the Word of truth – which is the only effective answer to falsehood and error. **The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God** (Ephesians 6:17). **The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword** (Hebrews 4:12).

The Bible has many sword-like qualities. It pricks the conscience, wounds the pride of the sinner, pierces our defences, lays bare our sin and need, kills false doctrine and unholy living. God's way to overcome error is the proclamation of the Gospel. We cannot answer false doctrine and living by legislation, prison or burning of heretics. Only truth can defeat error. We have no other weapon than this sword and we must use it fearlessly.

And one day this Word will change its function (Revelation 2:16). Unless the Nicolaitans repent, He will come and fight against them with the sword of His mouth. The Gospel which saves those who obey also condemns those who refuse. God holds us responsible for our response to the truth we have known. From those to whom much has been revealed, much also will be required. The very word which Jesus spoke will condemn the rejecter on the last day. His saving word turns judge, and his life-giving word becomes executioner. **As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day** (John 12:47,48).

In the conclusion, Christ makes a promise to the ones who conquer, i.e. who hear and receive and live by the Word. **To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it** (Revelation 2:17). The manna of Christ is Christ Himself, the true bread of heaven. As Israel fed on manna in the wilderness, so today the believer is satisfied by Christ, the Bread of Life, who is hidden from the world.

But there is to be feeding on Christ beyond this life. The verse points forward to the heavenly feast.

*“Then shall I see and hear and know
All I desired or wished below”*

In heaven there will be a new and richer revelation of Christ to the believer than he has ever known on earth. We shall retain our individuality and personal relationship with Christ. Future manifestation of Christ in glory will perfectly satisfy our hearts and minds. **Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known** (1 Corinthians 12:13).