

7 Churches Tour – 2019 - Pergamum

Introduction

- The city of Pergamum is 30 miles north of Smyrna, and is located on a high mountain spur, making it easy to defend. It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, so was a center of cultural and political influence.
- The library contained over 200,000 rolls of parchment rivaling the world famous library of Alexandria, and it was in Pergamum that parchment was first manufactured in response to Pharaoh Ptolemy V cutting off the export of papyrus scrolls from Egypt. These economic sanctions only spurred the development of a better produce, and papyrus scrolls were eventually replaced by parchment. Its temples and medical practices were also famous, and it was a center of the worship of the god Asclepias.
- Worship of the goddess Roma, and of the Emperor, were crucial to holding the Empire together. Pergamum was the first city to have a temple to the god Augustus (29BC), a focal point for persecution of Christians.

The Message to the Church of Pergamum

- **Rev. 2.12-17.** Jesus commends the church of Pergamum (313-538AD) – they were holding fast to His name, even though they lived in a city with a temple to Augustus where the cult of Roma was enforced.
- Antipas, a Christian, was a faithful witness unto death. “Antipas” means “In place of father.” He was killed for his faithfulness to God. Satan can’t attack God directly, so he attacks those who faithfully bear His name.
- And as Satan could not destroy the church through persecution – the Smyrna era – he now attacks through compromise. It is easy to recognize overt persecution and to defend against it. Compromise with seductive teachings or practices is harder to recognize and to defend against. A Romanian church leader once said that in his experience, “99% of Christians can withstand persecution, but 99% of Christians fall before materialism.”
- Pergamum tolerates those who uphold the teachings of Balaam. John is referring to the way Balaam attacked the Israelites at Baal Peor in Numbers 25, by sending in Moabite women who seduced the Israelites into sexual immorality and idol worship.
- Recognizing the dangers of compromise, the Council of Jerusalem had explicitly warned Gentile Christians against sexual immorality and food offered to idols. However, in Pergamum, paganism and error were now mixed with truth. To strengthen her position politically, Pergamum co-opted pagan practices, molded itself around the ruling pagan elites, and Sunday – the Roman day of the sun, replaced the God-given Sabbath day.
- Jesus calls the compromised church to repent. They can learn again to distinguish truth from error by using the Word of God – the sword that comes from his mouth. And the promise to those who repent?
- The repentant will eat of the “hidden manna.” Manna was the mysterious bread of heaven that kept the Israelites alive on their march to the Promised Land. In John 6.31-35, Jesus is the true manna of God.
- The repentant will receive a white stone. In the Roman judicial proceedings of the day, a white stone signified acquittal, and a black stone signified condemnation. To receive a white stone from God means to be declared righteous – innocent of all charges.
- The repentant will receive a new name from God, a new beginning and a new destiny. A putting aside of the past and its mistakes, and the promise of a new renewed walk with God, e.g. Abram – Abraham. Yet, this new name “no one knows except the one who receives it.” The new name also refers to the name of God, which is unknown even to this day....but which the faithful members of Pergamum held fast to in persecution (2.13).
- In bearing the name of God, the faithful of Pergamum are the physical representation of the invisible God. When people see them, they see God. They are called to faithfully represent Him in an era of compromise with sin.

Conclusion

- In this letter to Pergamum, Jesus is speaking to compromised Christians, who have been seduced by the gods of their era and have fallen into sexual immorality. A compromised / confused church. LGBTQ?
- Just as the ancient Israelites had to gather manna every day, so we are invited to feed on the true manna of God – Jesus and His teachings, every day, as we also journey to the Promised Land. In so doing, His teachings will help us distinguish right from wrong, truth from compromise, and thus bear a faithful witness in a compromised world. The Pergamum experience calls us to emit light rather than smoke from our candle!