

Churches Nearer Heaven
The church at Pergamum
Remaining courageous in the face of danger

Intro: The book of Revelation was written during a time of suffering for the early church. Consequently several of the letters to the seven churches of Asia mention the challenge of persecution. Last week we looked at the church at Smyrna and saw how they faithfully endured hardship and persecution. Today in a similar way let's take a look at the Lord's letter to the church at Pergamum.

The church at Pergamum shows us the importance of remaining courageous in the face of danger.

The city of Pergamum was an intimidating place to live!

Over a hundred years (133 AD) before Jesus was born, King Attalus upon his death had bequeathed the city of Pergamum and his kingdom to Rome. Pergamum became the royal city of Asia and the capital of the Roman province. The city boasted a library of over 200,000 volumes. Books had previously been written on papyrus, but the city of Pergamum gave its name to new writing material made of the skins of animals called "pergamene" (or as we would call it "parchment") derived from the city's name. Pergamum became the seat of the very first temple in honor of the Roman emperor as a god, the temple of Augustus (see coin). Here is where the worship of the emperors had its origins in Asia. In addition, there was a great altar to Zeus and a temple to Athena the patron god and goddess of the city as well as temples to Dionysus and Asclepius (god of healing). So that in Pergamum was a one-two-three punch against the people of God involving the intimidating power of both Asiatic and Greek religion, and the Roman imperial cult. And this may be the reason why Jesus called Pergamum the place "*where Satan's throne is*" and "*where Satan dwells*". Opposition like one sees in Pergamum often solicits two responses—courage or compromise.

In Pergamum most of the disciples of the Lord had shown great courage.

'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. (Revelation 2:13)

Jesus commended the church because they had held fast to Jesus' name when it would have been easy to give it up. They had taken seriously the exhortations of Peter:

... but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. (1 Peter 4:16)

In addition, they "did not deny" the faith of Jesus (His teachings) when it would have been easy to do so. When "everybody" professes faith it isn't so hard to be faithful; but what would happen when the disciples saw people dying over their confession? Jesus speaks of one man named "Antipas" who

gave his life for his confession. What a test that must have been when the Christians might have been wondering, “Who’s next?” Yet in spite of the danger, they kept on!

What an inspiration and example they are to us! What an incentive they give us not to be intimidated by our culture; but instead to boldly profess our faith and declare Jesus’ words.

In Pergamum some of the disciples decided to compromise.

‘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. Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (Revelation 2:14-15)

Every disciple who knew his OT would immediately see the significance of “the teaching of Balaam”. When this prophet was prevented by the Lord from cursing the Israelites, he found another way to destroy them. He counseled the Moabite king Balak to send out some of the pagan women to tempt the Israelite men to participate in the sensual worship of Baal (Num. 25); and they took the bait and were destroyed for it! (By the way, the Greek word for “stumbling block” means just that—a bait stick that lures the unsuspecting animal into a trap that results in its death!)

So in Pergamum there were those who compromised. They worshipped Jesus and then also participated in the popular religions of the culture. They decided they would have it both ways—bow before the throne of the Lord on Sunday and the throne of Satan on Monday!

Like the people of God in every age we too must have the courage to be uncompromising when the society around us approves behavior contrary to God’s will.

What enabled the church at Pergamum to remain courageous in the face of danger?

They saw a greater Lord

The compromisers responded to the power of Rome, confessing Lord Caesar; but the courageous would respond to the power of the universe, confessing the Lord Jesus Christ!

They feared a greater sword

The compromisers would respond to the power of the earthly sword, the power of the government to take one’s life; but the courageous would respond to the one who “has the sharp two-edged sword”, the power of the King of Kings to destroy not merely one life but one’s soul in eternal judgment.

They desired a greater reward

Compromise would have gotten faithless disciples temporary earthly compensation; but faithfulness to the Lord would bring a greater eternal reward. Jesus couches his rewards in cryptic terms to make the greatest impression: hidden manna, a new name, a white stone.

Compromising disciples may have gotten an invitation to the pagan banquets, but the courageous would receive an invitation to the banquet table of the Lord and access to “the hidden manna” that brings eternal life.

Compromising disciples might have been known by name by the “in” crowd; but the courageous would receive “a new name” which only the Lord knows and by that name have intimate association with Him. Compromising disciples might have avoided being “black balled” by the authorities; but the courageous would receive “a white stone”, the sign of the Lord’s acquittal at the judgment.

Conclusion: The church at Pergamum gives a great example of one of the NT important themes. The Lord Himself had said:

And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.” (Mark 8:34-38)

Most of the church at Pergamum had taken that message to heart. Have we? If we are to be a church nearer heaven we must also remain courageous in the face of danger and uncompromising in the face of popular opinion.