

WEEK 4: THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM - THE COMPROMISING CHURCH

Pergamum had served as the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor for over 25 years and was an important religious center for a number of pagan cults. It was the first city in Asia to build a temple to Caesar and it became the capital of the cult of Caesar worship.¹ Of Pergamum an ancient writer said it was “given to idolatry more than all Asia.”²

The book of Acts makes no mention of the founding of this church. According to Acts 16:7-8, Paul passed through the region of Mysia, where Pergamum was located, on his second missionary journey, but there is no record that Paul either preached the gospel or founded a church there during that time. Most likely, Paul founded this church during his ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10) when the gospel was preached throughout Asia.³

Many writers have noted that "Pergamum" comes from the Greek word *gamos* that means marriage. This letter pictures a church married to the world rather than to Christ.⁴

The church at Pergamum was surrounded by a pagan culture, just as we are surrounded by an increasingly godless culture. As you study this letter, be attentive to what God wants to teach you through His Word.

DAY 1: THE DESCRIPTION OF CHRIST

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:12-17 (Today we will focus on verse 12 but read the entire letter to get an overview of the message and the church.)

1. Jesus describes Himself as the “One who has the sharp two-edged sword.” What two things is the “sword” symbolic of according to these verses?

Ephesians 6:17

Revelation 2:16

¹ MacArthur, *MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson: 2006), 1965.

² C.F. Pfeiffer, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), Re 2:12.

³ MacArthur, *NT Commentary on Revelation*, 84.

⁴ Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Revelation,” in *The Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas L. Constable* [CD-ROM] (May 2004 Edition), 33.

2. How does Revelation 19:11-16 support this symbolism and purpose of the sword?

3. Why is this description of Christ especially appropriate for this church?

4. Describe the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12-13.

II. Looking Upward

5. How does the Word judge the intentions and thoughts of the heart?

6. Can you give an example of a time when God's Word convicted your heart of an attitude or action?

III. Looking Deeper

What do you learn about Jesus as the Judge in these verses?

1 Corinthians 4:5

James 4:12

James 5:9

How do these verses impact your life personally? What personal application can you draw from the truths of these verses?

IV. Looking Reflectively

Jesus Christ is the one and only Judge. It is not our place to judge others.

Are you presently judging someone else? If so, confess it.

Jesus knows the true motives and intentions of our hearts.

Take some time today to ask God to search your heart and to show you sin and wrong motives in your heart that you may not be aware of. Allow His Word to penetrate your heart. (Psalm 139:23-24)

DAY 2: THE COMMENDATION

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:13

1. What did Jesus commend this church for?

2. How would you summarize this commendation in one word?

Note: "Where Satan's throne is" is referring to the fact that Satan "ruled" from Pergamum as it was the official center of emperor worship in Asia.⁵

⁵ Barker, Zondervan NASB Study Bible, 1851.

Note: Antipas was the first martyr of Asia. According to tradition he was slowly roasted to death in a bronze kettle during the reign of Domitian.⁶

3. According to Ephesians 6:10-18, how are we able to stand firm for Christ? List the specifics that we are instructed to do.

II. Looking Upward

4. Are you taking full advantage of what God has made available to you in order to stand firm?

In which of the areas of Ephesians 6 are you strongest?

In which areas do you need to improve in order to stand firm against the schemes of the devil?

5. Pergamum was a place where Satan ruled. In what areas of our society today are we allowing Satan to rule or gain power?

6. What are some examples of ways we may “subtly deny” Christ?

⁶ Ibid.

III. Looking Deeper

In Daniel 3, King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold before which the people were to fall down and worship. Whoever would not fall down and worship would immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire. As you read Daniel 3:12-30, what observations do you make about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their steadfast faith in the midst of tribulation?

How did their steadfast faith impact Nebuchadnezzar?

IV. Looking Reflectively

It's possible to hold to the truth in the midst of Satanic power.

“Revelation prohibits us loving our lives more than His gospel; it summons us to follow the model of Antipas as faithful witnesses, no matter what the cost.”⁷

How are you doing in the area of steadfastness and faithful witness for Christ?

What “cost” are you being asked to pay for the sake of Christ?

Meditate on 1 Corinthians 15:58. *“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”*

⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 129.

DAY 3: THE CRITICISM

I. Looking to God's Word

Read Revelation 2:14-15

1. What was Jesus' concern or criticism about this church? How does the church at Pergamum differ from the church at Ephesus (2:2)?

Note: *The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22-25. Being fearful of the Israelites because of what they had done to the Amorites, Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse them. After trying unsuccessfully three times to curse Israel, Balaam came up with another plan. He decided to corrupt them by his counsel. He counseled them to have Moabite women seduce Israelite men into intermarriage, resulting in the blasphemous union of Israel with fornication and idolatrous feasts.⁸*

2. What do we learn about Balaam and his teaching from these verses?

2 Peter 2:15-16 (The story of the donkey and Balaam is found in Numbers 22:21-35).

Revelation 2:14

3. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-8, we read about a similar situation in the Corinthian church. How was the situation similar to the church at Pergamum?

How should the Corinthians have responded?

Paul rebuked them for becoming "arrogant." Why would arrogance keep them from dealing with the situation appropriately?

⁸ MacArthur, *MacArthur Study Bible*, 1965

4. We are not to follow teachings contrary to God's Word, nor tolerate those who do. How does Paul instruct Titus in Titus 3:9-11 concerning those who are not teaching truth and trying to undermine the believers' faith?

II. Looking Upward

5. Jesus rebuked this church for tolerating those, like Balaam, who were undermining people's faith. What are some stumbling blocks we need to be on the lookout for which could potentially undermine our faith?

6. In what ways does the world tempt us to compromise with our values and integrity?

III. Looking Deeper

Jesus rebuked this church for tolerating those who were following the false teaching promoting idolatry and immorality. Instead, they should have confronted them. The church at Pergamum failed to obey the biblical mandate to practice church discipline. According to Matthew 18:15-18, what is the proper way to practice church discipline?

Why do some churches, like Pergamum, shy away from this?

Have you seen church discipline exercised in your church? If so, what were the results?

IV. Looking Reflectively

We are not to turn a “blind eye” to wrong doctrine in the church. Jesus wants His church to stand firm on the truth of His Word and to confront those who don’t.

Moral integrity is essential to the spiritual vitality and health of a church. If it is compromised, the church is in serious danger.

Are you aware of anyone around you who is teaching false doctrine? How are you dealing with it?

Are you turning a “blind eye” to someone in the church who is blatantly disobedient and compromising with the world?

DAY 4: THE INSTRUCTIONS AND WARNING

I. Looking to God’s Word

Read Revelation 2:16

1. What is Jesus’ instruction to the church at Pergamum?
2. What is His warning and what does it mean?
3. Compare and contrast His instruction and warning to the Pergamum church (2:16) with the instruction and warning to the Ephesian church (2:5).

4. Why were the warnings appropriate for each specific church and its shortcomings?

II. Looking Upward

5. Those who were following the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans were to repent. They were not to be corrupted by immorality and idolatry. How do we see these two areas in our society today?

6. How do we as individuals and as a church balance being “in the world” but not “of the world”? How do we protect ourselves from being pulled into the world’s way of thinking?

III. Looking Deeper

How does Paul’s message to the Thessalonian church in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 relate to Jesus’ message to the Pergamum church?

What was the decision by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:20, 29 regarding things contaminated by idols and immorality?

IV. Looking Reflectively

“Compromise with the world draws divine discipline.”⁹

Are you compromising with the world in any way? If so, how?

“We need to make sure that we are influencing the world with the kingdom’s values, not embracing the world’s values where they conflict with those of the kingdom.”¹⁰

Are there areas where you are embracing the world’s values instead of kingdom values? If so, follow the instruction to this church: confess and turn away from it.

DAY 5: THE PROMISE

I. Looking to God’s Word

Read Revelation 2:17

1. What three things did Jesus promise to the one who overcomes?

2. We don’t know for sure what the “hidden manna” is referring to, but in light of John 6:31-35, 47-58, what is one possibility?

3. Scholars differ on the meaning of the “white stone.” This is perhaps the most difficult to interpret of all the rewards in Revelation 2 and 3. Warren Wiersbe gives two possible explanations: “In those days, a white stone was put into a vessel by a judge to vote acquittal for a person on trial. It was also used like a ‘ticket’ to gain admission to a feast.”¹¹ How would these two explanations apply to a believer in a spiritual sense?

⁹ Mark Bailey and Tom Constable, *Nelson’s New Testament Survey* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 615.

¹⁰ Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 128.

¹¹ *Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, Rev 2:12.*

4. Scholars also differ on the meaning of the “new name.” In light of Isaiah 62:1-5 and 65:15, what is one possibility? In light of Revelation 22:3-4, what is another explanation?

Note: Regardless of which view you hold concerning the “hidden manna” and “the white stone with a new name,” one thing is certain. The promises revolve around the Lord Jesus Christ and they are well worth the wait. We may experience a small glimpse of these promises in this life, but the fullness of these promises will not be grasped until we see Him face to face!

II. Looking Upward

5. How does Christ nourish you and sustain you spiritually on a daily basis?

6. In the Bible, names reflected one’s character. If God were to rename you based on your character, what would you want it to be and why?

7. How do these three promises to the overcomers encourage you to view life from an eternal perspective rather than from a temporal, earthly perspective?

III. Looking Deeper

God gave new names to several people in the Bible. What are their new names and why were they given those names? What promises did He give them when He renamed them?

Genesis 17:5-6

Genesis 17:15 -16

IV. Looking Reflectively

“The Pergamum church faced the same choice that every similar church faces. It could repent and receive all the blessedness of eternal life in the glory of heaven. Or it could refuse to repent and face the terrifying reality of having the Lord Jesus Christ declare war on it. Maintaining the path of compromise ultimately leads to judgment.”¹²

I pray that we would be a church that takes a strong stand for God’s truth, refusing to compromise with the world.

What is one “lesson for life” that you can apply to your own life from this letter to the church at Pergamum?

¹² MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, 91.

