

THE REVELATION

THE EDICTS TO THE 7 CHURCHES (continued): Chapter 2:12-29

THE 7 CHURCHES: Pergamos (Chapter 2:12-17)

1. **Church:** To a group of believers
2. **City (Destination):** *Pergamos* (the Greek spelling) or *Pergamum* (the Latin spelling), was one of the most prominent cities in that area (Asia Minor) at the time Revelation was written, only 2nd to the city of Ephesus. Pergamos was about 50 miles north of Smyrna and about 20 miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. It was known as a “religious center” more than anything else, and was home to many pagan temples, including the “gods” Asclepios, Zeus, Demeter, Persephone, Dionysus, Serapis, and Isis. It also had the distinction in the Roman world of being the first to dedicate a temple in honor of a Roman emperor, Emperor Augustus, in 29 B.C. The symbol for the god Asclepios was a serpent, leading some people to say that Jesus had this in mind when He said, “I know your works, and where you dwell, *where Satan’s throne is.*”
 There was, however, a better symbol for Satan’s “throne” in Pergamos. Pergamos had a large temple dedicated to Zeus, and it was situated on the citadel of the city where *everyone* would have been able to see it. The altar area which measured 120 by 112 feet overlooked the city,¹ and had an open altar area that was shaped like a *huge throne*. With its heavy emphasis on a variety of pagan religions, it is easy to see how Biblical Truth would get lost, and how many different opinions would be polluting the *living water* that the church there would have received. The name of the city, whether you use the Greek *PERGAMOS* or the Latin *PERGAMUM*, is made up of two parts: *per* (excessive) and *gamos* (marriage). As you’ve already seen, it is not hard to see how the name fits...
3. **Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author’s (Jesus’) Self-Description):** *“These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12):* The Greek word for the “two-edged sword” is *distomos*, and refers back to Revelation 1:16. While this sword was used for killing, in the New Testament this “sword” is more often used to refer to Jesus’ (the *Word of God* in John 1:1) ability to divide between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil, as it is used in Hebrews 4:12: *“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”* This image fits perfectly with the need for discernment in Pergamos with all of the different ideas floating around.
4. **Commendation:** *“I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells” (2:13).* While we don’t really know anything about Antipas from history, it is clear that those who were faithful to the truths of Jesus Christ and the Gospel were not appreciated in Pergamos! We see here that Antipas was faithful to “My faith.” Antipas refused to accept anything other than “the real thing,” believing that Jesus was indeed *“the Way, the Truth and the Life”* (John 14:6).

¹ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Second Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014.

With all the pluralism that existed in the city, Antipas remained faithful to the *only* truth: Jesus. That faithfulness cost Antipas his life, but for Jesus to name him *specifically* as a martyr should tell us how important *the truth* is in contrast to anything else!

5. **Criticism (Rebuke):** *“But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate” (2:14-15).* While many in the church of Pergamos maintained their faithfulness to the truth which had been shared with them, the influence of the many cults and religions was felt within the church. But what were “the doctrine of Balaam” and “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans”? While the Nicolaitans were discussed in our study of the church in Ephesus (2:1-7), Jesus’ words here connect the two somehow. The Nicolaitans taught a false doctrine of licentiousness, and that is how it connects to what Balaam “taught”, from his story in Numbers 22-25:

Numbers 31:15–16 records that Moses said to the children of Israel, *“Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord.”* The doctrine of Balaam therefore was the teaching that *the people of God should intermarry with the heathen and compromise in the matter of idolatrous worship.* This is in contrast to “the way of Balaam,” that is, selling his prophetic gift for money (2 Peter 2:15), and “the error of Balaam,” his assumption that God would curse Israel (Jude 11).²

Balaam’s influence in Israel’s history was felt when they, as a result, were more and more engaged in idolatry and sexual immorality. Just like they were brought to a place of judgment because of their compromise, Jesus tells the church at Pergamos that they may see His discipline and/or judgment.

Notice what we see here in terms of the resulting mess they had; three groups meeting together with different “agendas.”

- **1st** of all, they had those who were faithful like Antipas, who believed the truth and would not depart from it.
- **2nd**, they had people who were in their meetings who had trusted in Christ alone but who were willing to compromise their faith by marrying unbelieving pagans. We know how that works... they would be more and more under pagan influence.
- **3rd**, they had people who were in their meetings who believed false doctrine outright, and probably assumed that they could somehow synthesize those beliefs with a belief in Jesus. Jesus, however, did not give them that option: *“I am THE Way, THE Truth and THE Life; no comes to the Father except through Me”* (John 14:6).

These three groups in the same room would have provided for some very interesting conversation! In the midst of this pagan city, the pressure would have been much greater on the Christians to maintain pure doctrine; but they had already let some of the wrong people into the building...

² Walvoord, John F. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Galaxie Software, 2008.

- 6. Correction (Exhortation):** “*Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth*” (2:16). While most teachers focus on the sword in this verse, let me ask you to see something else. Did you notice that He tells them that without repentance, He will come to one group and fight against a *different* group? “I will come to *you* and I will fight against *them*...” This often goes unnoticed. But given what we’ve seen, there is so much compromise in this church, just like the story of Balaam, and the story never ends well. Jesus’ church is to remain pure, and if it does not, He will fight against those who would pollute it with either false teaching and/or false practice. The church in Pergamos was far too tolerant of falsehood in their midst, and they needed to *change their thinking*. Jesus must be the only Truth and source of Light! When Jesus comes to fight (with the *sword of His mouth*), there will be judgment not only between right and wrong, good and evil, but between truth and falsehood. In Pergamos, there was a strong relationship between the civic and religious culture. In both their situation and ours, however, the true church is encouraged to reject both false doctrine and false practice. Stay close to Jesus!
- 7. Citizen Promise/Close:** “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it*” (2:17). We will see that this is the last church where “hearing the Spirit” comes *before* Jesus’ promise to the overcomer/believer. The movement to last place in the remaining letters actually shows that “hearing” for some reason becomes more important (like “one last thing...”). Perhaps hearing Him becomes more and more difficult over history? While I wouldn’t be dogmatic about *why*, there is a clear shift for some reason after what we read here in Pergamos.

Jesus gives three promises to the overcomer/believer³ in Pergamos. First, He promises “hidden manna” to eat. From my perspective, this could have at least a couple of meanings. “Hidden manna” could be a reference to the manna that was “hidden” in the ark of the covenant⁴, a symbol of God’s presence and provision for His people. If so, it points to our future life with Him; He will be with us and provide for us. The other possible meaning for “hidden manna” is that Jesus is speaking about Himself, pointing to the fact that we will have both eternal life and eternal fellowship with the Him as the bread of life (John 6:35-40). Jesus is “hidden” from us now, but we will see Him when He comes for all of God’s sons and daughters. His promise to all those who believe in Him is that He will provide spiritual nourishment *eternally* (which for believers begins the moment they believe!).

³ If this is the first thing you’ve read in the series, you might want to go back to the discussion in the introduction to the seven churches where I argue that the easiest solution to the “overcomer” section of each of the churches is to see the *overcomer* as a believer, in line with John’s use of “overcomer” in 1 John 5:1-5. This also allows each letter from King Jesus to His people to end with GRACE...

⁴ “The original ark of the covenant was permanently lost in 586 B.C. (cf. Jer. 3:16), and the manna inside it had vanished before then. But a wide spectrum of Jewish tradition declared that Jeremiah (e.g., 2 Maccabees, 4 Baruch) or an angel (*2 Baruch) had hidden them and that they would be restored *at the end time*...” from Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament. Second Edition*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014. Note on Revelation 2:17.

The second promise to the believers at Pergamos is a “white stone”. Many suggestions have been made concerning the meaning of the white stone and why it would be something special to receive.

Among the guesses: pebbles of various colors were used for admission to public celebrations; a black stone was the sacred symbol of the infamous Asian goddess Cybele; white stones used for medical purposes were associated with Judea; and perhaps somewhat more significantly, jurors used black stones to vote for a person’s guilt but white ones to vote for innocence. Though Pergamum usually used dark brown granite for building materials, they preferred white marble for inscriptions.⁵

There is actually an easy way to put some of these ideas together, and they all point to something that is true for ALL believers. Not only will Jesus bring the ultimate “healing” to all believers when He comes for us; all believers will also be part of the ultimate wedding feast, as we see in Revelation 19. Beyond that, all believers have already been declared righteous through Jesus’ blood, so a white stone (instead of a black one) is another way to say that believers have been accepted and are special to Him:

The giving of the white stone to the believer here, then, is the indication that he has been accepted or (*and!*) favored by Christ, a wonderful assurance, especially for those who have been rejected by the wicked world and are the objects of its persecution.⁶

This leads Jesus to His third promise. Each and every white stone will have a unique name given to the receiver. While all of the promises to overcomers/believers look to their ultimate fulfillment in Revelation 19-22, the “new name” promised to believers here may seem a bit strange to us. In ancient culture, a person’s “name” was an indication of their relationship and their identity (and our names now are not much different in that respect), as well as their reputation. For example, when Jesus says to the church in Pergamos that they “*hold fast to My name,*” He is saying that they have a reputation for honoring their relationship with Jesus by their words and actions. To be given a “new name” by a superior indicates that a person has been given a new identity with new responsibilities. Remember Simon in John 1:42? Jesus gave him *a new name, Peter*, when he became one of Jesus’ disciples. Revelation 19:12, speaking about Jesus’ return to rule, says that Jesus “*had a name written that no one knew except Himself.*” This “name” speaks to Jesus’ uniqueness and the intimacy of His relationship with the Father. Isaiah prophesied that when Messiah comes to rule, the nation of Israel will receive a new name, pointing to how special they are to God: “*The Gentiles shall see your righteousness, And all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, Which the mouth of the LORD will name*” (Isaiah 62:2). With that in mind, believers in eternity will “*see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads*” (Rev. 22:4), pointing to our eternal identity as sons and daughters of God. Overcomers/believers in Pergamos are promised that they will have a special, unique “name” given to them by Jesus, telling us that He knows each one of us intimately, and each of us is uniquely favored!

⁵ Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Second Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014. Note on Revelation 2:17.

⁶ Walvoord, John F. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Galaxie Software, 2008. Notes on Revelation 2:17.

THE 7 CHURCHES: Thyatira (Chapter 2:18-29)

1. **Church:** To a group of believers
2. **City (Destination):** Thyatira was located about 40 miles southeast of Pergamos. While it was a much smaller city, it was very successful because it was a center of trade. It was known for having many guilds (something like a social club) which were organized by their trades. Among the trades there, you would find the production of purple dye and products made from it (Lydia in Acts 16:14-15 was from Thyatira and sold this purple dye) as well as various metal works. Those who worked with any kind of metals would need a powerfully hot fire to do their work.

Involvement in the guilds would have encouraged participation in pagan rituals, and refusal to participate would often mean you would be treated as a social outcast. Christians who refused to worship the pagan idols or engage in the sex rituals that were often part of that “worship” were excluded from the guild. Without the support of the guild membership, they might not be able to work in their trade (and make a living).

This church has the longest address of any of the 7, and there is a reason!

3. **Critic/Caesar/Christ (Author’s (Jesus’) Self-Description):** *“These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass” (2:18)*. The first part of the description of Jesus here points back to 1:13, although there we see Him as the *Son of Man*; here the focus is more specifically on His deity. Jesus is the *Son of God*. The second and third elements of His description are drawn from 1:14-15. All three parts of the description (as usual) point back to chapter 1 and also point to Jesus’ present glory and power. But why these three things? In their environment, surrounded by pagan gods and pagan practice, they needed to remember that Jesus is “THE Way, THE Truth and The Life.” The title Son of God points to His deity, as well as His authority to determine right and wrong...

The phrase “Eyes of fire” points to Jesus’ righteous *judgment*, as well as the *refining* fire that removes impurities. The church in Thyatira was surrounded by infecting and polluting influences, and Jesus is the One who sees everything and knows every heart. Beyond that, the phrase “His feet are like fine brass” tells us that even Jesus’ feet are radiant, and that Jesus *stands* and *walks* in glorious brilliance. And that’s not what we expect bare feet to look like, right? Both of these descriptions, however, fit the context of the church in Thyatira. They would certainly have had many metal-working guilds, and they would all be familiar with the heat required to work with metals. The metal associated with Jesus’ feet (in Greek *CHALKOLIBANO*), was a rare alloy which was known to be especially brilliant when polished. As with all the churches, Jesus speaks directly into the reality of Thyatira...

4. **Commendation:** *“I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first” (2:19)*. While we will see that Thyatira was a *mess*, Jesus does find a few good things to say about the church there; as a matter of fact, He points to 5 good things, the number of *grace*. These five good qualities should tell us that there were indeed some serious and mature believers within this group. Beyond that, Jesus says that they have *done more over time*, in contrast to the Ephesian church (2:1-7) which had “left their first love.” Jesus is speaking about their hearts, and He sees the love of the believers in Thyatira. Sometimes, however, love can lead to compromise, as we will see here...

- 5. Criticism (Rebuke):** *“Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent”* (2:20-21). Students of the Bible disagree concerning the identity of “Jezebel,” but that shouldn’t stop us from understanding Jesus’ words here. Whether her name was actually Jezebel or not, this woman had placed herself in a position of authority and from that position was promoting false doctrine and false practice. She was a false prophetess (Jeremiah 23:16). Someone might argue that she wanted to make life easier for the church there. The guilds were powerful within the culture and their association with pagan beliefs and practices was intense. But Jezebel had no association with Jesus or the truth, so her only influence was a seduction *away* from Jesus and *away* from the truth, *just like* the Jezebel of the Old Testament (1 Kings 16 and after).

The believers (church) in Thyatira is rebuked by Jesus for permitting her to be in a position of authority with such serious repercussions. She should not have been allowed to have any influence at all! Jesus had given her opportunities to repent, but after being permitted by the church to “prophesy,” she had no desire to change anything. While she was guilty of “seducing” the believers (“My servants”) toward false beliefs and false practice, the believers were guilty of allowing her to be in a position to accomplish that. Teachers may incur a stricter judgment (James 3:1), and Jezebel was facing both temporal and eternal judgment. But the believers in Thyatira were accountable to God for allowing false doctrine and false practice to be taught in their midst. That should tell US that it’s a good idea to make sure teachers have *both* integrity *and* a strong belief in the truth of God’s Word!

- 6. Correction (Exhortation):** *“Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the mind and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come”* (2:22-23). If we read this exhortation slowly enough, we will see that Jesus is distinguishing between four groups, somewhat similar to what we saw in the letter to Pergamos. The difference here is the presence of the false prophetess in their midst. Here are the four groups you can see in Thyatira:

- The 1st group is made up of faithful believers, who are commended at the beginning of the letter. They are encouraged to hold fast “what they have,” indicating that they should persevere as faithful believers in their walk with Jesus. They are distinguished by the fact that they “have not known the depths of Satan.” One of the greatest (“deepest”) deceptions of Satan is the belief that false doctrine and false practices provide some benefit; he tries to call darkness “light,” which is what the pagans in Thyatira were doing.
- The 2nd group is actually just one person, “the woman Jezebel,” the false prophetess who has assumed a position of authority in the midst of the believers and is attempting to mislead them. Note the irony of Jesus throwing her onto a *sickbed*; she would pay the consequences for *other beds* she had been laying on! This punishment was for two reasons: because she was misleading others, and because she refused to repent. This is one place where the punishment sure seems to fit the crime...

- The 3rd group is made up of *those who commit adultery* with Jezebel. Based on what she was teaching them, the “adultery” spoken of here could very easily have been both spiritual *and* literal! Something subtle should be seen here, though. What do we normally assume when we say someone has committed adultery? Don’t we assume that they are *married to someone else*? Just like the Apostle James called believers “adulterers” because of their friendship with the world (James 4:1-10), Jesus calls out those believers in Thyatira *who were being unfaithful to Him because they were listening to her...* Jesus makes it clear that those who are married to Him but are willing to listen to her will face serious consequences. While I don’t think he’s talking about “the” great tribulation here, there is clearly the expectation of some kind of physical judgment. We only need to think of Israel when they were disobedient and went after *false gods* to see an ominous parallel. Do you think maybe that’s why Jesus chose the name Jezebel here?
- The 4th group should be easy to distinguish from the 3rd, although most people don’t seem to notice the difference. Jesus says that He will “kill *her children* with death.” Jezebel’s *children* constitute a group that is distinct from those who commit adultery with her. While those who *commit adultery with her* are being unfaithful in their marriage (to Jesus!), *her children* are those who are *her offspring*; these are children who have always been related to false doctrine and practice, and therefore have never been rightly related to God by faith in Christ. This is perhaps the strongest judgment of Jesus, and is not very different from many things Jesus said about unbelievers in the Gospel of John. Because they love darkness, they believe falsehood, practice unrighteousness and won’t believe in Jesus for salvation as a result. The outcome: death. They will be condemned for believing and practicing falsehood instead to coming to Jesus, the True Light.

Jesus here also makes it clear that He *knows* (with eyes like a flame of fire) *every mind and every heart*, whether they belong to Him or not! As influential as the guilds were in Thyatira, *and with the temptation* to simply be a part of the culture (*and encouraged by Jezebel*), Jesus’ exhortation to the believers there was simply *to remain faithful to Him*.

7. **Citizen Promise/Close:** “*And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations— ‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’—as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”* (2:24-29). Here the overcomer (believer) *who ALSO perseveres* is promised power (authority) over the nations. *Notice that the church at Thyatira is the ONLY church which has a promise that is partially contingent upon perseverance* (“AND keeps My works until the end”). This is a fairly common promise made to Christians in the New Testament: that we will in some way reign with Christ in his millennial kingdom (cf. I Cor. 6:2-3, II Tim. 2:12, Rev. 3:21, Rev. 20:4-6). Here the believer who “keeps My works until the end” is promised a special position of authority in that Kingdom. The “morning star” in verse 28 is interpreted in several different ways, and some ways make His promise *contingent* upon perseverance. But remember that all the “overcomer” promises point forward to Jesus’ promises for all believers which are seen fulfilled in Revelation 20-22. In Revelation 22:16, Jesus calls himself “the bright and morning star.” Our morning star, Jesus, will come for *His bride* and “give Himself” to *her* (=the church, all believers), and, in line with the ancient Jewish wedding, we will “fully know” our Groom when He comes for us in the Rapture!