**Notes for Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis**

By Dr. Joseph Fuiten

**Revelation 2: 12- 17--Pergamum** (Pergamos)

*12"To the angel of the church in* ***Pergamum*** *write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 I know where you live-- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-- where Satan lives.14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. 15 Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 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. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*

 Pergamum (or Pergamos) was the main city of Mysia. It had such a rich history. Unlike Ephesus, it was not a seaport. Instead, it was located high in the hills, about 15 miles inland. The city was filled with great buildings including a library containing over 200,000 items. The Egyptians, worried their great library at Alexandria might be overshadowed by Pergamum, refused to ship papyrus to Pergamos. In response, these clever people developed a new form of writing material, Pergamena charta, or parchment. Mark Antony, ever the great friend to Cleopatra, gave Pergamos' library to her. Cleopatra had its volumes moved to Alexandria. Into this city of book, the people of “the book” brought the Gospel. A church was established. It is to this church that John writes the Lord’s Revelation.

 The descriptive name that Jesus gives to himself here is “Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” We recall from chapter 1 that this sword comes from the mouth of Jesus. Its biblical purpose is to subdue and punish the rebellious kings and nobles. Jesus will take his rightful place on the earth.

*May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron, to carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints. Praise the LORD.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

At the moment, the church at Pergamum was a mixture of faithful and disobedient. The same sword that subdues Satan and his minions might be used against some of these Pergamum people unless they repented of their willful sins. God’s sword will be used. The only question is whether we will be happy to see it put to use or be the victims of it.

 Twice Jesus mentions Pergamum as the place where Satan lives. Paganism was everywhere in the ancient world. Almost any city could have such a title given to it. I am not entirely sure why this city was singled out in this way. We know there were three imperial temples, dedicated to the emperors. As a government city, capital of Asia Minor, it was the center of loyalty to the Emperor and the Roman Religion. Ephesus had Diana, but they had the government. It also had the temple of Asklepios (the Greco-Roman god of medicine and healing), and the medical center where the physician Galen worked (c. A. D. 160). There were the more “traditional” temples as well. A temple to Athena was here along with ones to Dionysus and Aphrodite. The temple to Zeus had an altar showing Zeus defeating snake-like giants. There were gods aplenty in this “city of temples”. Most of these temples were located in one area of the city, a grove of trees. Together they were the pride of Pergamum. Although the gods had different names, we know they were all religious fronts for Satan.

 In spite of all the competition, these people generally remained true to the Lord’s name. He commends them for not renouncing their faith during the time of the recent persecution. He mentions Antipas, who according to tradition was the Bishop or Pastor of this church. This Pastor had been a faithful witness of the Gospel and had been killed for his efforts. Apparently the Roman strategy was to pick off the leaders. John is in exile and Antipas is dead. In spite of that, the people had remained faithful to God.

 After commending them for the good of their lives, he says those scary words in verse 14, “*Nevertheless, I have a few things against you.”* What follows is a listing of two kinds of sins. They are becoming familiar now because they have been mentioned before. Both Peter and Jude mention this category of sin. Jude 11 describes backsliders who "*have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit*." There is a combination of sin and greediness. The common problem with the first century church was dealing with the residue of their old way of life. They were used to eating in the temples. It was the center of their social life. Sexual immorality was commonplace and was even associated with many of the religious temples. In the Old Testament, Balaam told the Moabite leader how to weaken the Israelis by getting them to worship Baal. Indeed, it happened exactly that way:

"*The people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifice of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel*"[[2]](#footnote-2)

The problem was not so much any congregation member, here or there, engaging in sinful practices. That is part of the human condition in every culture and generation. The issue was more likely the toleration of certain levels of leadership acting in this way. There were apparently teachers who were advocating, with some success, for this practice.

Jesus also mentions the Nicolaitans. They were also successfully active in Ephesus leading people back into the temple of Diana and into the sexual practices associated with it. Both Balaam’s error and the Nicolaitans were leading people back into sexual sin and into the old way of life. No doubt, like modern preachers and teachers who do not adhere to biblical standards of morality, they could justify their teaching in some way. They might have fooled some of the people, but they didn’t fool God who here calls them to account.

These teachers of immorality were given a choice. In verse 16 Jesus says, “*Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth*.” Now we learn why Jesus describes himself as the one who has the double-edged sword. He intends to use that sword on those who have become his enemies. If Revelation is about the enemies of God being subdued, then he begins with enemies within his own house.

The hidden manna that Jesus promises to those who overcome is a bit of a mystery. If the context has any implication, Jesus may be offering “hidden manna” of the soul as opposed to the food of the temples. They may miss some social gatherings in the temple, but Jesus will feed them in the new way just as he did with Israel in the wilderness. He might also be offering himself as the reward of the righteous. He himself is the manna that came down from heaven. It might be hidden at the moment, but when they overcome, it will be given to them.

The concept of the white stone with a new name on it is far from certain. There is no scholarly agreement on what it means. Some think it refers to the white pebble of acquittal used in courts of justice in that era. While we don’t know the origins of the concept, we can appreciate that it is good. It is one of the rewards that come to the overcoming person.

###### Revelation 2:18-29--Thyatira

18 *"To the angel of the church in* ***Thyatira*** *write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.*

 The description of Jesus takes us back to chapter one. In Revelation 1:13 he is called the Son of Man, with “*eyes like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace*.” It is almost exactly the same words and clearly the same meaning. The Son of Man is also the Son of God. With these piercing eyes he is able to try the hearts and minds of all the people.

 You have to appreciate the people of Thyatira. They were known by the Son of God to be doing the deeds of the Christian life. That’s good. They also showed love and faith. That’s good! They were persistently engaged in the service of the Lord. Not only that, they are doing more now than they were before. They had not left their first love. Instead they grew stronger and stronger in their devotion and service. This sounds like a great success story to me.

 Jesus is generally pleased with this group, although he does hold one thing against some of them. In verse 24, Jesus indicates that verses 20-23 was directed at only some within the group, not all of them. Some were doing wrong, but the others were not.

## Jezebel and those who tolerate her

 *20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.*

 Bible students will recall that Jezebel opposed the true prophets of the Lord and promoted her own false prophets who worshipped idols. Her modern, spiritual namesakes were engaged in religious activities but the results were not godly.

 God announces his judgement against Jezebel. She will be cast into a bed, not of pleasure but of suffering. Her children will be killed with death, that is, the second death.

 From verse 24 we see that Jezebel may well be a kind of code name for demonic or Satanic things. The hidden knowledge goes under the name “occult” or secret. There is no need to proclaim some hidden or difficult word of God. The Bible is really so simple that the newest Christian can understand the essentials of it. (At the same time, the most profound scholar will not get to the bottom of it!) There were major problems, beginning in John’s lifetime, of people promoting secret knowledge, higher knowledge, or special revelation knowledge. Jesus is not impressed with knowledge, however profound. He is impressed with morality and obedience.

## Earthly Rule by the Overcomers

*24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): 25 Only hold on to what you have until I come. 26 To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— 27 'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery'-- just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*.

 I guess it is ok to “hold the fort”. Jesus said hold on. If we hold on, and overcome the enemy, there is a great reward. Such an overcomer will receive authority over the nations. We presume this is not a reference to any kind of temporal rule this side of the rapture. Even though the church certainly became a great temporal power, the reference may well be to a future time when we will rule and reign with Christ. Especially the reference to an iron scepter suggests this. It is a direct quoting of the second Psalm. In that Psalm the Lord’s king is installed in Jerusalem. *Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters." The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

We know that the one who rules with a rod of iron is Jesus. John himself tells us this in Revelation 19:15-16. The phrase about the iron scepter is again in quotation marks. *Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.*

 Those who overcome will have the morning star, a further reference of Jesus. Peter tells us “*And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

**Revelation 3:1-6--Sardis**

The images from Sardis (in modern Turkey) provide an excellent illustration of the spiritual shifts in Sardis. There are the remains of a Christian church largely destroyed by the Moslems. Two columns rise above the rest providing evidence of the huge temple to Artemis. When the Greeks arrived in 330 BC they found a temple to Cybele, a local fertility goddess, on this site. The religion seemed quite like their Artemis religion so they readily incorporated the themes of Cybele into their goddess Artemis. One more god or goddess in the pantheon of gods doesn’t make much difference.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was a friendly religious takeover made easy, not just because they are both goddess fertility religions, but also because they share a common demonic root. This is the background to which the Lord gave his message to the church.

Revelation 3:1 "*To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of* ***him who holds the seven spirits of God*** *and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your* ***deeds*** *complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. 4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

 I can’t imagine anything worse than a false reputation for being alive. They were dead. Jesus knew they were dead because he knew their deeds. It is a very simple but overlooked idea. **Spiritual life is measured by deeds**.

The culmination of Revelation is the wedding of the Lamb. In that wedding, the bride will be beautifully clothed. Jesus is preparing us for the final march down the aisle, when we will walk with him, dressed in white. “*Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)[[5]](#footnote-5)*

The Sardis church had a problem. Their deeds were so insufficient. Their works were not complete. The church was not completely dead but only a little bit of life remained. Jesus urged them to strengthen what remained since it was about to die. We can almost hear James saying “faith without works is dead.” Their faith was gasping but remained alive by only a sliver of work.

When Jesus finds their work incomplete in God’s sight, what sort of work is he referring to? In verse three he calls them to remember what they have heard and obey it. This is a general call to obedience and covers all the general topics of the Christian life. They must overcome the world in order to be dressed in white. Clearly, then, part of their work is to defeat the world and its sins.

**Righteous act**s in the Jewish way of thinking reference three particular acts. They are almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These are the three righteous acts in Judaism, in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and in Christianity. Among the more general encouragement toward obedience and overcoming, these three acts would also be in view.

By the call to **wake up, it is plain that these are Christian people who have fallen into a lull of inaction**. It is like they are asleep. If they continue on in their spiritual slumber, they will sleep right through the day of salvation and be lost. If they sleep on, Jesus will come while they sleep. The inference is clear enough that when he “comes to you,” you will not be ready.

 In spite of the general sleepiness of the Sardis crowd, there were still some who were active. These “few people” of verse four had not gotten their white clothes soiled. It’s funny that those who do not work have dirty clothes, but those who work have unsoiled clothes. Jesus says that the function of doing deeds, or righteous acts, is what makes a person worthy. He does not mention the blood of Jesus as making them worthy. He mentions their righteous acts.

 We should think about salvation as coming through faith in the blood of Jesus. We continue in that salvation, and in some senses retain it, by the works of the Christian life. In American Christianity, we have tilted so much in favor of Reformation theology that we are in danger of losing Biblical theology. There is a balance here that is being lost.

We know that the first **work is belief in Jesus**. That was the answer Jesus gave to that question early in his ministry. “Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent*.’"[[6]](#footnote-6) Paul emphasizes grace in Romans when he speaks of salvation. “*And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace*.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

How do we square the words of Paul with the words of Jesus here? I believe the balance of the two is contained in Paul’s writings to the Ephesians. We cannot have grace without works or works without grace. *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

 There is a condition attached to having our name permanently in the book of life. We must overcome. Since it is a conditional statement, we must meet our part of the obligation to keep our name in the book.

1. Psalm 149:6-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Num. 25:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 2 Pet 1:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The coin is a silver denarius "The great mother-god, Cybele" Obverse: FAVSTINA AVGVSTA. Reverse: MATRI MAGNAE - Cybele seated left, holding branch, her elbow on a drum and behind, a lion. Rome mint: AD 161-175 = RIC III, 706 (s), page 270 - Cohen 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rev 19:7-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John 6:28-29 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rom 11:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Eph 2:8-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)