

REVELATION

Seeing, Knowing and Serving Jesus Christ
Today at the Edge of History

Chapter 2:12-17, 3:1-6

Texts: Revelation 2:12-17, 3:1-6 - Pergamum & Sardis

To the Church in Pergamum

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.



Ruins of the Aesclepium at Pergamum

To the Church in Sardis

3 “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.

A Word About Tolerance

We learn from this message [to the Church at Pergamum] that **tolerance is not a biblical virtue.** Patience is. Understanding is. Civility is. Graciousness is. Mercy is. Humility is. But not tolerance. For what is the first word of the Gospel? What was the first word out of Jesus' mouth as He begins His public ministry? It is the word **“repent.”** The word simply means “to stop, turn around--you are heading in the

wrong direction.” The word is “metanoia,” “think again.” **“Change your mind.”**

The Church is to be an **“inclusive”** community in the sense that all are welcome: Jew and Gentile, free and slave, male and female--all are welcome! But **the Church is not to be inclusive of all ideas**, of all pre-suppositions, of all social and spiritual persuasions. All of us are welcome, but all of us are then called

by the Head of the Church to repent, to change our minds, to **submit our thinking to the thinking of Jesus Christ.** As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (12:2). Or as J. B. Philips renders it: “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your minds from within. (Darrell Johnson, Discipleship on the Edge, p.80)

Read & Reflect - 2:12-17, 3:1-6

First Reading/First Impression: If a letter like one of these two was addressed to your church and the pastor read it from up front on a Sunday morning, how do you imagine people would respond?

Second Reading/Main Thought: What do you see as the most dominant word in each of these two letters? Why?

Pergamum:	Sardis:
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“Any belief shorn of the confidence to live it publicly is not a belief at all but a posture. And postures are easily overwhelmed.”
 - Hugh Hewitt, *The Embarrassed Believers*, p.xiii

Search

Verses 2:12-17, 3:1-6 - Fill in the chart below from the contents of the Pergamum & Sardis Letters.

Church	How Jesus Presents Himself	What Jesus Knows	What Jesus Has Against Them	What Jesus Calls Them To Do	Warnings	Blessings
<i>Pergamum</i>						
<i>Sardis</i>						

1. In what ways does Jesus' letter suggest the "Satan" ("the deceiver") lives in Pergamum?

2. What is wrong with the "teaching of Balaam" and of "the Nicolaitans?" What can the believers do about it?

3. What factors might have made the Sardis church appear to be "alive?"

4. What factors made the church at Sardis actually almost "dead?"

Apply - 2:12-17, 3:1-6

1. What are two or three false ideas that our culture asks us to go along with? (Think about advertisements in the media and debates in the news.)

2. What are some ways that wealth and affluence could be harmful to a person's faith in Christ?

3. How would you describe the place Jesus, who says He holds everything in His hands, occupies in your life (in your thinking, feeling, daydreams, planning, spending...)?

4. What place does Jesus, who says He holds every church in His hands, occupy in our church (our thinking, feeling, vision, planning, spending...)? If Jesus took His Spirit away, would it make any difference?

5. Pray for God's help and guidance for you and for our church in these things.

Pergamum... This city's name means "citadel" in Greek because it was built on a cone-shaped hill rising a thousand feet above the surrounding valleys. Its symbol was the sword because Pergamum was "one of the few cities to which Rome had given 'the right of the sword,' the power to inflict capital punishment" (G. Krodel, *Revelation*, p.116). Since the 2nd century before Christ this was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. In 29 B.C. they were granted permission to build the first temple in honor of Caesar Augustus. It was a center for emperor worship. The library at Pergamum was more renowned than any other except perhaps the one in Alexandria. The word "parchment" is derived from the name "Pergamum." A huge throne-like altar to Zeus towered above the city on a terraced hill behind it, and here animals were burned in sacrifice around the clock so that the smoke stayed in the public eye (and the smell in the public nose). Below this on and around this hill were many other temples for a variety of pagan gods including one where the worship of Aesclepius, the god of healing, was centered. Here people would come from far and wide in hopes of being touched and healed by one of the sacred snakes (The serpent was Aesclepius' symbol and is still prominent today in the insignia called the *caduceus* used by medical associations). Hostility here was particularly intense for Christians as suggested by the martyrdom of one named Antipas who "may have been executed for failing to sacrifice to the cult of deified emperors" (David Aune, *Revelation*, p.194).



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The letter to **Pergamum** emphasizes the alliance believers are called into with Jesus who fights with the “sharp, double-edged sword” of truth against the barrage of false ideas and false gods to which every human culture demands they accommodate...

v.2:12 - “**sharp, double-edged sword**”...

This image may be a conscious referral to the city’s symbol (see also 1:16).

v.13 - “**where Satan has his throne**”... may refer to the dominant temple of Zeus or to the entire collection of pagan temples encouraging idolatrous worship... “The one Jesus called ‘the Deceiver’ had the mind of a whole city: from politics to medicine to religion” (Johnson, p. 78).

v.14 - “**Balaam**”... The name comes from the Hebrew words “*Baal*” (“lord, conqueror”) and “*Am*” (“people”)... He was the pagan prophet who refused to prophecy against Israel, when asked to do so by Balak the king of Moab, because God told him not to... what he could not do by direct confrontation, though, he accomplished by advising the Moabite women to lead the Israelite men astray through sexual immorality (Num. 22-25, 31:16).

v.15 - “**Nicolaitans**”... The name comes from the Greek “*nika*” (“he conquers”) and “*laos*” (“people”), note the similarity to “*Balaam*”--both were trying to “*conquer the minds of the people*” (Johnson, p.80)... This is probably the general name for a particular brand of heretics in the early church which included the “*Balaam*” group of Pergamum as well as some people in Ephesus (see John’s 1st letter) and “*Jezebel*” and her followers in Thyatira (4th letter)... some early christian writers draw a connection between this group and the “*Nicolas of Antioch*” mentioned in Acts 6:5--a recent convert who was one of the first seven deacons in Jerusalem--but probably with more imagination than historical evidence... apparently this group taught Christians to compromise with pagan society, arguing that their spiritual liberty in Christ made idolatrous and immoral practices acceptable...

v.16 - “**Repent**”... see notes on tolerance (p.1)

v.17 - “**hidden manna**”... the heavenly sustenance available to the believer (contrasting with the unclean food of Balaam and company)... It calls to mind the miraculous feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16)... “**white stone**”... There are many interpretations suggested for this. It might be a “*tessera hospitalis*” which was a white stone split in half and then worn by two friends with the other’s name written

on their half... or it could be a symbolic token of membership (in the family of God) or admission (to the Messianic Banquet!)... In any case the white stone is a symbol of purity and an indication of the intimate relationship Jesus calls His faithful followers to... “**new name**”... for God’s victorious

Sardis... The capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, this was a city of great wealth and fame known for its opulent and licentious living. Its church was probably the wealthiest and largest of the seven. Several important trade routes went through this city as did the river Pactolus out of which much gold was taken in ancient days. Its wealth also came from a renowned industry of woven textiles. The acropolis (city fortress) of Sardis was built on a spur of a mountain and was nearly unassailable. Only twice in its history was Sardis taken in battle and both times it was due to lack of vigilance as enemies snuck in (King Cyrus and the Persians in 549 BC and Antiochus the Great in 218 B.C.). The city was also devastated by the great earthquake of A.D. 17 and then rebuilt with the help of Emperor Tiberius who gave them a five year break from imperial taxation. The city boasted many pagan temples

and the largest known ancient synagogue for a Jewish community that contemporary sources reveal to have been unusually large, wealthy and influential.



Ruins of the Temple of Artemis at Sardis

ones (see Isaiah 62:2, 65:15).

The letter to **Sardis** was directed to probably the most attractive and “*alive*” of the churches on the surface, but one that was actually almost “*dead*” and whose deeds are “*not complete,*” probably because they were “*the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity... too innocuous*

to be worth persecuting” (George Caird, *Revelation*, p. 48)...

v.3:1 - “**seven spirits**”... probably a way of indicating the completeness of the Holy Spirit (see 1:4)... “**seven stars**”... the seven churches (see 1:20)--Jesus holds the churches in His hand. They are in his protection and subject to His will.

v.3 - “**like a thief**”... reference to the city’s history of occasional lapses in vigilance (see above)...

v.4-5 - “**dressed in white**”... symbol of purity, garments of the redeemed in Christ, more precious than those woven together in Sardis... “**book of life**”... in ancient cities citizens’ names were kept in registers and erased when they died or if they committed treason (see also Exodus 32:32; Psalm 69:28; Daniel 7:10, 12:1; Luke 10:20; and Philippians 4:3)... “**acknowledging his name before my Father**”... repeating Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:32 and Luke 12:8, a wonderful promise and a challenge to remain faithful...