

The Wavering Church
Revelation 2:12-17
11/2/2014

America has a very excellent claim to be Satan's throne in modern world culture. Idolatry is everywhere in America, whether it be the worship of money, sex, power, sports, entertainment, relationships, or the one that sort of encapsulates them all: worship of self. You can always tell when Satan has enthroned himself in a particular country, and that is when idolatry and sexual immorality run rampant. Not only are idolatry and sexual immorality common in America, but they are approved by the majority of people. Pergamum was very similar in first century Asia Minor. There are few things in Revelation more obviously relevant to our modern culture than this letter.

Pergamum is described here as the place where Satan's throne is. Pergamum had a very good claim to this dubious distinction. In fact, it had four clear reasons why Jesus (through John) would call it the throne of Satan. Firstly, it had the most fervent emperor worship of any city in Asia Minor. They took the worship of Caesar very seriously. Secondly, Pergamum had a very large altar dedicated to the worship of Zeus, the Greek god of the sky, wind, and lightning. Thirdly, Pergamum also had a very strong worship of the Greek god of healing, Asclepius. Now, what makes this so compelling as a reason for calling Pergamum the place where Satan's throne is located, is that the symbol of Asclepius is a serpent. The serpent is often in Scripture (in fact, much more often than not) the symbol of Satan. Certainly, while the healing arts are wonderful things for people to learn, it is very easy to start to worship medicine instead of the God of all healing. I'm sure our own M.D.'s and nurses could give you many instances where worship winds up in the wrong place. Worshiping medicine and doctors, however, is satanic. Fourthly and lastly, Pergamum was called the throne of Satan because of the martyrdom of Antipas mentioned in verse 13. It is certainly an indication that Satan holds sway in a place, when fine, upstanding Christians are being martyred for their faith.

The folks at Pergamum, however, had held fast to the name of Jesus. This is no small commendation. They were experiencing severe pressure to conform to the godless culture around them, and yet they held fast to the name of Jesus Christ. They did not deny the faith even when Antipas was martyred for the faith. So Jesus encourages the people there, just as He does for us today: when there is severe pressure to conform, it is easy to try to rationalize our surrender to culture. We might think that it's okay to bow down to some of these idols as long as we know that they do not really exist. I'm sure that this kind of thinking would have tempted the Christians at Pergamum just as much as it tempts us today.

Jesus Christ describes Himself in this letter as the One Who holds the two-

edged sword in His hand. The two-edged sword is the Word of God, as we saw when we looked at it in chapter 1 of Revelation. Each description of Jesus has a particular relevance to each letter. With Smyrna, we saw that Jesus being the One Who died and came to life again is also the One Who has the power of life and death in His hands for the people of Smyrna. Similarly, here also we learn that Jesus has the resources that the church of Pergamum needs. In particular, Pergamum needs the Word of God. The Holy Spirit working through the Word is surely the thing that will keep Pergamum steadfast, and the Word is also what will fix the problems that Pergamum is currently experiencing.

What are they experiencing? Well, it seems fairly clear that idolatry and sexual immorality are the problems that Pergamum faces. Of course, idolatry and sexual immorality usually go hand in hand. This is the sin that Balaam taught Balak to put in front of the Israelites. It will be helpful to read the Old Testament passage:

Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. 2 They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel. 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the LORD, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." 5 So Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor." 6 And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who *were* weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. 7 Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw *it*, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; 8 and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. 9 And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand. (Num 25:1-9 NKJ)

Now, this passage does not mention Balaam. But this is the incident at Baal Peor. We read later in Numbers 31 that it was Balaam who instructed Balak to send over the Midianite women in order to seduce the Israelite men. Not only was there sexual immorality involved. These Midianite women were simultaneously enticing the Israelites away from the worship of the one true God in order to worship Baal. You can easily see how closely tied together are idolatry and sexual immorality. In the case of the idolatry of Baal of Peor, they were really one and the same thing. At Pergamum, then, there were those who were seeking to do the same thing to the church there that Balaam did to the Israelites. Verse 14 tells us the result of this

false teaching: idolatry and sexual immorality.

Verse 15 says that the Nicolaitans were also gaining a foothold. We do not know exactly what the Nicolaitans taught, but there are many people who think that the name “Nicolaitans” is just another word of describing the people who are following the teachings of Balaam. One possible reason for thinking this is that the name Balaam means “lord over the people” (in Hebrew) and the name “Nicolaitans” means basically the same thing in Greek.

The call is a call to repent. We can understand this call to repent in two ways, and I believe the text is saying both of them at the same time. The first call, of course, is for those in the church to repent. For those who are Christians who have caved in to the pressure from the world, the call is to conform no longer to the world's pressure. As one outstanding translation of Romans 12 has it, “Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold.” Do not care what the world will say about you. Only care about what God says about you. Children, this message is particularly important for you, since you live in a world of peer pressure that is dramatically more effective at changing children than adult peer pressure is. Do not be fooled when someone tells you of all the good things you will experience through using just a little cocaine, or pain pills, or sex. It will never deliver what is promised. The only real thing you will reap is guilt, not only real guilt in the sight of God, but also the feeling of being guilty. The Lord calls on us to turn away from those things, and turn to the living God.

If the first way we understand this is for the church, the second way we can understand this is for non-believers. They also are called upon to repent of their ways and put their faith and trust in the only Lord and Savior of sinners. The problem is that we don't understand the nature of our sin. We think that our sin is freedom and fun. We do not see the bars of the cage that surround us until God helps us to see. How does He do that? By the Word of God. Jesus says that He will bring war against those who do not repent, and He will do it through the sword of His mouth (verse 16). Jesus will also fight tooth and nail against evil and sin in this world, whether He finds it in the church or outside the church. Don't we want to be on the winning side? Remember the main message of Revelation? Jesus is going to win! And the reason He is going to win is that He has already dealt the death blow to Satan, sin, and death.

There are some great and precious promises given here to the one who overcomes. Notice that they are not given to those who are overcome by the world. They are given to those who, in this case, overcome the temptation to conform. The church at Pergamum was wavering. And so Jesus gives them not only the stick in verse 16, but also the carrot in verse 17.

The first promise is that of the hidden manna. Of course, manna makes us think of the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites. They were given manna from heaven to eat. Manna has a very rich symbolism attached to it that brings to mind

daily bread, the Lord's Supper, and the final great wedding feast of the Lamb. Why does Jesus say here that it is hidden? What is hidden is usually hidden for a time, and revealed at the right time. The biblical term for something that is hidden and then revealed at the right time is "mystery." It is hidden because we do not now see it, nor do we know all that it means. However, what Jesus promises here is ultimately the wedding supper of the Lamb, which will be a glorious feast indeed, greater than our imaginations can fathom. Don't you want it?

The second promise is the white stone with the name written on it that no one knows except the person who receives it. This has puzzled people for many years. The explanation of the symbols here is rooted in the history of the ancient world. At a trial in a courtroom, there were two stones used: white and black. The people who judged the case (the jury) would use a white stone to mean that the person was innocent, and a black stone to mean that the defendant was guilty. In the case of Pergamum, we know that the culture had already given the black stone to the entire church. The church was guilty of not conforming to the cultural pressures of the idolatry and sexual immorality. However, that is not the courtroom that ultimately matters. The courtroom that matters is God's courtroom. And here Jesus says that he will show the entire world that the white stone belongs to God's people, not the black stone.

What, then, is the significance of the name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who has received it? Whose name is it? And why does no one know this name except the one who receives the stone? There are many different answers to this question that have been given. I will only give you the one that I think most likely. Revelation 19:12 tells us that Jesus has a name written on His forehead that no one knows but Himself. And, for right now, that is true. However, the promise for those in Pergamum is for the future. They will eventually know it. In Isaiah 62:2 a promise is given to the people of God that they will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. And in Isaiah 65:15, the name of the servant is given to the people. So what is happening here in Revelation is that the name of Jesus Christ is written on that white stone. Knowing the name is not just knowing what the name is. In the Bible, knowing the name of God means having access to the riches of God as far as we are able. So what this promise is really getting at is that one day we will have as full an access to Jesus Christ as it is possible for created beings to have. It is, then, a rather astounding promise. Everyone who receives it will know it. That means that the whole church will know it.

All of this letter is intensely practical and relevant for us in 21st century America, but I did want to say some things about idolatry and about sexual immorality. About idolatry, the most important point to remember is this: the idol will never satisfy your deepest longings. It promises fulfillment, but will only leave you wanting more. The thing we worship that is not God will never satisfy.

Instead, the idol will turn you into a version of itself. There is a great book written by G.K. Beale entitled *We Become What We Worship*. The Bible says this many times over. If we worship a block of wood, then we become spiritual blockheads. If we worship money, then we will become a bank that is bankrupt. The Bible describes Israel's idolatry in this way: when they worshiped an idol that could not see, hear, touch, taste, or feel anything, then the Israelites became just like that. They too stopped seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and feeling. The bad news, then, is that if we worship idols, we will become just like those idols. The flip side (the good news!) is that if we worship the one true God, then we will become like what we worship: we will become like God. In fact, the only way to be as like God as possible is to worship Him. People have wanted to be the god of their own lives. The tragic irony is that the more they worshiped themselves, the less like any kind of god they became. But the more we worship our one, true God, the more we will become like Him.

Lastly, a word about sexual immorality. Our culture today wants to muddy the waters. It wants to call good evil and evil good. Marriage is a good thing. Culture wants to call it bad. I well remember reading a bumper sticker that said that marriage was the main cause of divorce! Then they will call evil good. They will call homosexuality good, pornography good, adultery good, sex before marriage, very good! The Bible is not muddy on these issues, folks. The Bible is clear. The real question is whether we will follow the Bible, or whether we will allow the world to force us into its mold.

The beauty of marriage consists in this: that when it is a good, healthy, God-centered marriage, it gives us just a glimpse into what God has in store for us in the new heavens and the new earth. The reality will transcend all our imagining. For that will be a time and place where Satan is not only dethroned, but eliminated entirely from the presence of God and from the presence of God's people. Then God's throne will be visible to all.