

DWELLING WHERE SATAN DWELLS

Revelation 2:12–17

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I. The third in a series of letters sent by the Lord communicated through John the apostle to the churches of the Roman province of Asia.

If you were traveling to Pergamum in the time this was written or even now you would take the road coming out of ancient Smyrna, now modern Ismer in western Turkey, drive about 40 miles north along the coast then turn inward, right, northeast about another ten miles. You would come to the city of Pergamum, a striking city. A city whose very name means citadel because the city itself was located on a hill that rose sharply from a plain, some thousand feet into the air. It probably looked somewhat similar to the impression one has of buttes when you're driving along the western part of the United States and suddenly you see rising out of the plain a vast hill. From Pergamum you could see the Mediterranean or the Aegean Sea some 10–15 miles in the distance. It was a town that gives the traveler of the royal city, the home of authority. Its political history matched its geographic setting. It was impressive geographically. It was impressive historically. It had been the seat of government for some four hundred years before the writing of this letter of the Lord to the church. A ruler about a century and a half before Christ had willed the city and all of its province to the Romans. The Romans took the city and made it their capital city of the province of Asia. And although the city is on the coastland and Smyrna and Ephesus were greater cities, it was at Pergamum that the headquarters of the Roman proconsul was located. Just like we have our great cities in California—Los Angeles and San Francisco, yet our capital city Sacramento is inland and a smaller city, not nearly as impressive in terms of its size. But a government quarter nonetheless.

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Such a town was Pergamum. It was a place that was very much given to pagan worship. It was the first town of Asia to build a temple in honor of a living Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar. The most spectacular part of the city was that on the height of this hill on its terraced upper division were located the temples devoted to the pagan gods. And at Pergamum was the center of worship of four of the leading cults of the day. The great altar of Zeus jutted out over a cliff in the mountain like a throne perhaps that brings to mind the Lord's words in Revelation 2:13 "...where Satan has his throne" (NIV).

The god of healing and his priests and priestesses were headquartered at Pergamum. Their symbol was a serpent standing for the healing powers, which came through the serpent, which the members of the cult were involved in. The sign of the serpent as a means of healing is still conveyed today on medial emblems. When you see the serpent, it came from Pergamum.

This town of Pergamum was sort of the ancient Lourdes where people came who were sick hoping that in the environment of the temple they would be healed.

Given all of its pagan worship however it was also regarded by the ancient world as a university town. Two things especially stand out about Pergamum. From this town came a new form of writing material widely used in the ancient world—a Pergamum sheet—a parchment that was a definite improvement on papyri that could easily crumble with age. The writing invention at Pergamum, a hide that could be written upon and our great manuscripts coming from the early centuries come on this type of writing. This town was a university town. It had a great library, 200,000 volumes of these parchments—the second leading library of the ancient world. There's a church in this town. We don't know how it began. Its presence is a mystery. It probably began through the efforts of Paul and his ministry at Ephesus. Then the word was carried to Pergamum

but the church is there. As the Lord addresses this church, as with all the letters, He starts first by describing something of His character that relates to the church.

II. Taking symbolism from chapter 1 where the vision of the Lord is communicated to John, the one part that applies to Pergamum especially is now taken and He is seen at Pergamum as the one who has the sharp two-edged sword.

It's very precise in the Greek what is being said. Literally it says, "These things says he who has the sword, the two-edged, the sharp" (Revelation 2:12). The Lord is saying I have a sword, a sharp one, a two-edged one.

Why is this phrase "two edge" important? Because this church at Pergamum had a two-edged need that the Lord must address with the word of His mouth, which the sword represents. At Pergamum the church faced the sword of the government. In Roman times the Roman proconsuls were divided into two categories. Those who had the power to bear the sword and those who didn't have power to bear the sword. A proconsul then had authority to bear the sword, had the power to take life. And he could take life on the spot if he so chose. At Pergamum the proconsul had the power of the sword. This church at Pergamum needed to see because it was going through a stage of martyrdom. They had already lost one of their midst to the sword of the government. There is one standing over the church who bears the ultimate sword. As Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell." A reminder to the church to remember its ultimate authority.

But this two-edged sword not only stands for the Lord's authority over government but it stands for His authority over the church and, according to Revelation 2:16, He is prepared to use it on the church. Unless they deal with the problem that is in their midst He himself will cut out the

problem area. We see the Lord represented to us as having a sword. We confess once more that the government is upon His shoulders. That is the ultimate authority. This may mean something more to Christians who live in an adverse political environment than it does to us. We're perfectly satisfied with our democratic forum. Can you imagine the startling words to the church today in Moscow as this word would come "To him who has the two-edged sword," to Him who stands above the power of governments and presidents and prime ministers. To Him to whom ultimate responsibility is given. He has the sword.

III. Christ then gives a commendation to this church.

Revelation 2:13 says "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" (NIV). This church is commended first of all for having an unbreakable grip on Christ in hell's headquarters. That's what Pergamum really is. Satan's throne where Satan dwells. The word which says "You hold fast My name" is the same word used in Revelation 2:1 where the Lord holds the stars, the leaders of the churches in His hand. So tightly in His hand that nothing can break His grip, nothing can pluck anything out of His grasp. He has hold of us. Here is a body of people who, in the midst of a very tough time, really has hold of Him. Revelation 2:13 says "You hold fast My name in that place where Satan dwells."

There's a certain sense of course where the presence of Satan permeates the earth. But there are places where he especially is evidenced and felt and seen.

I have a great feel for this letter to Pergamum because of several experiences of my family. One as a child I remember being with my parents who were missionaries to China in Tibet. One time we had gone up to minister and witness for the Lord at a festival, at the place of one-hundred

thousand idols—the annual butter-god festival. The Tibetians would bring out of the caves these exquisitely carved idols made out of solid butter, varied forms of color, some of them towering up to thirty feet in the air. It's very cold so they could do this without melting. They would come out and celebrate. The whole festival would be climaxed with a day given to a dance in honor to the lord of hell and death wearing demonic costumes. The priests of the religion would come out and do a dance in honor of the lord of hell and death. I remember being just off the temple grounds, a child of 7 or 8 years of age. The whole family, consisting of my older brother and sister and I with my folks could not sleep that evening because of the presence of demonic power in the place. So strong you felt like you could cut it with a knife. I didn't know all that was going on, but I knew something spiritually adverse was happening because I couldn't sleep and because when I wanted to say the name of Jesus it was as though cotton were stuffed in my mouth. My parents stayed up all night pleading the name of Jesus and the blood of Jesus to protect us. That scene sounds so strange to the western mind but in eastern religion it is very common. Satan, I think as C. S. Lewis says, in the western mind has chosen to infiltrate ideas and philosophies and the eastern religion has chosen to infiltrate persons. That's the difference. My mother tells about in her early days as missionary outside Peking. She and her sister were single. They were taken to a place and there was no room for them except in the top house. It was very high, the priest area in the temple grounds. There were no priests using this particular room they were to be in for the night. They took their cots and bedding and when they went in they found it was very small, only large enough to put up a cot on each side of an idol. There were two huge idols in the room. My mother and her sister did a very Christian thing. They threw sheets on the idols so they wouldn't be bothered by looking at them. Some time during the night my mother's cot began to shake. She recalls it jerking from head to foot. She tried to say

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“Jesus.” Finally after great difficulty to say the name Jesus the jerking stopped. She said, “We realized the power of the devil was in that place.”

That’s how the Christians must have felt at Pergamum. It was a stifling place to have to be as a Christian. It was a frightening place. Pergamum was the headquarters of heathen religion. It was therefore fitting that Satan would dwell there. But even more than that it was the place of Roman government authority, where the power to execute the Christians could be handed down. It was a place, therefore, where Satan dwelled.

These Christians are called persons who dwell there. “I know where you dwell,” Revelation 2:13 says. The word “dwell” is very strong in the original. It doesn’t carry at all the idea of someone who is passing through on a trip or a sojourner. It’s a person who has roots, who has to stay there day in and day out. It carries the aspect of permanence. In other words there’s no word to this church that they’re suddenly going to be vaporized out of the situation at Pergamum. They had to dwell there. And no escapist mentality has been permitted. To have to live where Satan lives. Maybe someone here lives in a home that is like hell, works in a place that is like hell, is in a school situation that is like hell. As a Christian you’re called. Maybe it’s your peculiar calling to stay there and to be there. Jesus says, “I know where you dwell.”

“You have an unbreakable grip,” the Lord says, “on Me in the midst of that. You have an unshaken loyalty in the midst of martyrdom. Even in the days of Antipas my witness being killed you stood firm” (Revelation 2:13).

Can you image what it would be like to live without the security of locks or laws? If you were to be in your home at night and it was not permitted for you to have locks on the doors or windows. Can you imagine never locking your home and having anything left after a few days? The security of your person could be invaded at any moment because you didn’t have security of

locks. Take away the laws along with the locks and you have to total insecurity. Then if an intruder comes in there is no government to back you up to say they're wrong. How would you like to live with that kind of frightening terror, day in and day out? You lay your head down on the pillow at night never knowing if during the night you're going to be robbed or your person is going to be assaulted.

This is the story of the church at Pergamum. A church without the benefit of locks or laws. A church put to the test in martyrdom. Antipas killed there—My faithful one, My witness.

We don't know exactly how Antipas was killed. Church tradition, perhaps legend, says that he was put into a bowl and roasted. Whatever the manner of death it was a heinous death. These Christians had to go through that.

This is a letter which may be, to a church like us which hasn't undergone persecution, a way to only kind of look in the window and see what's going on. We can't feel it. But it maybe makes us look a little bit harder at our desire to always have Christ get us out of problems. To always see that just before we have to go through any trouble He'll come along with a rescue key and spring us loose. There have been God's people through the ages who have been called to go through even death for His name sake and have not counted their lives as being unworthy of being laid on the altar for Him.

IV. A beautiful church, one holding fast in a tough time, But Christ gives to it a condemnation.

We would look at this church and we would say, What correction could we give? That's one reason why we know there's such inspiration behind these letters because only the Lord would dare to correct a church like this. I wouldn't want to go over to the church in Eastern Europe and say I have a message of correction for you. I would just want to sit there and cry and be there

with them, “You’re holding firm. God bless you. Keep going.” Who would have the audacity to correct?

But the Lord who sees His church, His bride, and Himself as pastor, all suffering is able then to correct His people and He brings a word of condemnation to the church. The condemnation is on those who are following the teaching of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans. Revelation 2:14,15 Jesus said, “I have a few things against you: You have some there that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (NIV).

What’s this teaching of Balaam? And teaching of Nicolaitans business? They’re probably the same group, not two different groups. In the Hebrew and the Greek the words mean the same. Balaam means, “to conquer the people.” And Nicolaitans from the Greek means, “to conquer people.” Balaamites is probably the word the Lord calls the heretical group. And Nicolaitans is probably the word they call themselves.

I submit, if you were a cult or heretical group, one of the things you would not do if you were going to give your group a name is name it after Balaam. He’s the person in Scripture who was so dense it took a donkey to speak to him (Numbers 22:28). That wouldn’t be exactly the most complimentary name in the world you could call your new group. I wouldn’t hang a shingle outside a church and call it the first Church of Balaam. I’d tend to pick a more complimentary name. Like Nicolaitan, which was very complimentary—conqueror of the people. That’s the church.

It’s striking what the Lord calls heretical groups and what they call themselves. You can see this demonstrated today—Jehovah Witnesses for example. The name is so beautiful—Witness for

Jehovah. But what are they really? Theologically they're Assyrians and historically Russellites. They followed a guy by the name of Russell. It doesn't sound all that spiritual to be a Russellite. It sounds much better to be a Jehovah Witness. You wouldn't call someone an Eddyite after Mary Baker Eddy. You would say they'd like to be called Christian Scientist yet here's nothing scientific about it.

So this kind of thing has been knocking around for a long, long time. The way the Lord perceives something and the way the group may perceive itself.

What was this particular group? It was a group that evidently brought compromise into the body. That's what Balaam did. And they were named after him by the Lord. Balaam was a prophet who a king of Moab by the name of Balak tried to hire to curse the people of God. If you can't lick up, curse up. Maybe you can have psychological warfare and they'll get all shook because this godly prophet cursed them and they'll go home, back to Egypt where they belong, into slavery and won't go into Canaan land. Balaam three times tried to curse Israel but he couldn't. He wound up blessing them every time. The king of Moab got so frustrated. He'd paid Balaam a whole lot of money to exercise the prophecy. He said I've got to get some good for my money. Balaam left him this piece of advice in Numbers 25 and 31 "Use your women as bait. Entice the children of Israel to commit adultery. When they do that they'll then fall into the worship of your gods." And Israel committed a terrible sin and twenty-four thousand died.

A grievous sin against God. It came through the counsel of Balaam who taught compromise with the world.

The Lord is looking at this church at Pergamum and so is Satan. Satan knows he can't kill it by persecuting it so he says I've got to burrow my way inside. There's two strategies he had. Either persecute the church or seduce the church. Just like when you have a political prisoner. If you

want to get something out of him you can either try to beat it out of him or you can treat them rough for a while then promise them some nice goodies if they'll give forth with what you want. Here was seduction. And there were those within this church who made it their doctrine to say it's ok to go to the heathen temples and sit down and feast at the tables, which are dedicated to the gods to partake, as Paul said, at the table of demons. It's ok to frequent the temple prostitutes, which were a common thing with the religions in that part of the world. It's ok. As long as you have Jesus too.

Translated into our culture this group might say something like this. We love Jesus but we also love our non-Christian associations and habits. We can worship Jesus and live it up at a bar party. We can praise the Lord and tell dirty jokes. We can catch Saturday Night Fever and be in church on Sunday morning. We can pay our tithes and beat our competition in a shady deal. We can be true to Christ and sleep with whom we want to without the benefit of marriage, male or female. We want all the benefits of grace and none of the costs of discipleship. We will die for Christ but we will not live for Him.

Instead of lifting up our associations to Christ, we let them pull us down. Here is always the danger in the body of Christ that it might compromise its clear stand on integrity and morality. There are those who try to stay within the church and keep this doctrine, this teaching that one could compromise with the world. In fact Jesus Himself very clearly says there are those (verse 15) who hold (and again it's that idea of a firm grasp upon) this teaching. Does the Lord then bring a condemnation to those who practice this kind of compromise with the world? Diluting Christian morals.

He condemns the church for tolerating the presence of this group within its midst. Here there's such a fine balance. At Ephesus the church is guilty of the sin of intolerance. They've been so

busy fighting heresy that they lack love. But here's church whose been so busy tolerating that they stood for little in the area of being right with God on a moral level.

So there's a fine line between the sin of tolerance and the sin of intolerance. The Lord says to this church you must deal with the situation. You must discipline yourself and not allow these people to feel at home among you unrebuked and unchecked in their attitudes. It's a stern word, which the Lord speaks to the church.

The correction He makes is that the majority is held responsible for the tolerance of the viewpoint in its midst. He tells the majority in the church to take the right action. But He also is saying that if they don't He Himself is going to come to the church and take action against this group and war upon them with the sword of His mouth. Which is perhaps His way of saying as Paul said in regard to some taking the table of the Lord unworthy that they became sick and died, that the Lord is going to visit with some form of physical punishment those in the church who practice this immorality.

Christ alone has power to correct His church. We don't live with laws and ethics, which are invented from day to day. But place our life upon the principles, the laws of God's word.

This is a stern word, which the Lord speaks to the church but it closes with a word of challenge, like all the other letters.

V. The Lord always closes on this positive note.

He issues to the church two challenges—to hear and to conquer. The first challenge found in verse 17, “He who has an ear, let him hear” (NIV), is given that the church might really listen to the Lord and do what He asks. The challenge to overcome is not simply to be saved by one's works but to participate in the arena of those who are saying praises to Jesus and overcoming by the blood of the Lamb. In verse 17, Jesus says if you overcome these things are you going to

have some hidden manna. Hidden manna is of course the food that God supplied to the children of Israel in the wilderness. It's striking how they got the name manna. When the food fell down the ground, the children of Israel came, they looked at it in the morning and said, "What is it?" in the Hebrew—*manna*; it's the "what is it" food. Literally.

Once Israel entered the promised land the manna ceased and they lived off the fruit of the land. But they kept a little pot of manna, the Jews did by command of God, a little part in a gold pot. It was kept in the holy place, in the tabernacle and later the temple. When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. that pot of manna disappeared. Tradition had it that the prophet Jeremiah who was living at the time took the pot of manna and hid it away and only the Messiah knew where it was and when the Messiah comes He would give His people the hidden manna. Probably this is what the Lord had reference to saying, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever" (John 5:53–58, NIV). The age of the Messiah, the kingdom of God has come.

In Revelation 2:17, Lord not only says He gives His church the hidden manna He says I'll give you a white stone. I tried to find some white stones this week. I wanted enough present so that today everybody coming in to both services would be given a white stone to hold all during the service. They're rare. In ancient times there were a number of interpretations regarding what it

meant to have a white stone. It's like after a period of time the culture changes. What was meaningful to one culture may not be meaningful to another.

Suppose human history goes on another two or three thousand years. America comes and goes like other nations. In two or three thousand years from now there's another culture and they have discovered one of our church bulletins which said on this day every person present got a ten-thousand-dollar bill. They don't have ten-thousand-dollar bills. So the preacher, trying to explain to the congregation would say, "In those days they used to have currency—one dollar, five dollars, ten dollars, twenty dollars, a hundred dollars and whatever other bills there. Ten thousand was very important to them." He'd have to explain it in order for it to have meaning. That's the way the stone is with us. In these days a white stone could be used for a number of purposes.

It was used in the law courts. When the jury was sitting hearing a case the individual jurors were given a white stone and a black stone. If the person they felt was innocent they'd drop a white stone in an urn, if the person were guilty they'd drop the black stone. The majority of stones would determine the verdict of the case. Jesus is saying "I'll give you a white stone, which is saying, in My court you are acquitted. You're righteous. I give you a white stone."

Another way in which the white stone was used was in some cultures in home life. Some had a peculiar habit in their homes for each person having an urn. At the end of every day the person put in that urn a white stone or a black stone. The white stone if the day had been a positive day, a happy day, a joyous day, a day worth living. But a black stone if the day had been bad and humdrum and filled with problems and despondency. You expressed your feeling toward that day by putting a black stone in the urn. Wouldn't that neat. If at the end of your life when you died the urn was taken and the stones were poured out and it was counted how many stones were

white and how many were black. It was determined then if the person had lived a happy or a sad life. How much ahead of us the ancients were! We think that to live a happy life all we need to do is live happy days. They just tracked it in every 24-hours.

So a white stone could mean a joyous existence.

This term also had one additional meaning. It was a stone, which was used in public life. It was a writing that could be on wood or on metal or on a stone. It was like an admissions ticket to an athlete who had been victorious. So it was sort of like a season pass to any spectacle or game or entertainment. Possession of that stone peculiarly marked and engraved allowed him admission. Or, a gladiator could be given a white stone for gallantry. Gladiators fought to the death. So if a gladiator was given a white stone with the initials “SP” engraved on it, the stone was an indication that he never needed to fight again. If anybody ever pressed him into service all he had to show was his white stone.

There’s a sense in which all these meanings make up this idea of what it is to be given a white stone. It is on the one hand to be acquitted. On another hand to be joyous. On another hand an admission ticket. And an exemption from any further labor or service. It is exactly what this church needs – an admission ticket to the messianic banquet. To the marriage supper of the Lamb. It’s the stone that permits you entrance. It’s symbolic of that. The Lord says you’ll get that white stone with your new name written on the stone, which no one knows except Him who receives it.

The fact of it being engraved on the stone shows that it’s permanent. Not written on paper, which could easily be discarded. It’s a permanent ticket and it has your own new name written on it, which no one knows except the one who receives it. That is he one who gave it to you and you know it. It’s a treasure between you and God. How do we make anything of this?

Let me illustrate. I'm called Dr. Wood by those perhaps who know me least—the public at large. I'm called Pastor Wood by many who know me more closely. My given name is George. When a person calls me George, they're fairly confident of addressing me on a first name basis. My children however call me Daddy. Only two in the world have that title for me. My mother has a name for me, which is hers alone. It is Georgie. My wife in turn has either one of two names for me which are hers alone—Babe or Honey. No one else can use them. The more endearing the term, the more restricted is its use.

It's the Lord's way of saying to us, "When I see your name it's not appearing on some giant church membership roll in the heavens. I know you so well and I know your personality so well that I give you a name so intimate and so knowledgeable of your personality that I am permitted access to you that no one else is. I'm permitted access to you that goes beyond the access of your mother, your wife, your children. I choose to give you a new name. Just between you and me. Like bridegroom speaking to bride, a name between two lovers, a name which cherubim and seraphim don't even know. As much as they know, they don't know this. This name describes our special relationship and your character as I see it. It's a name between us."

And it's a name He gives. If I were to give it I might wind up with "Insecure" as my name. Or "Inferiority Feeling." But I don't give the name. The person who gives the name has the absolute right. When I named my children we had the absolute power to name.

When the Lord looks at us and gives us this new name, which no one knows but us, you can be sure it's going to be a good name. As much as we know as Christians it's important to do introspection on our life, to weed out impurity and sin and weakness, we always fall back on the care of a loving God who sees us always as we shall be and not as we are now. And who says, this is what you are forever. I don't know what that special name is He's going to give to me. I

can't wait to find out! But it's going to be one of those additional little gifts of heaven that the Lord puts His own imprint upon our personality forever and ever.

Lord, what name would You use to make Yourself known to me? How would You describe me? Knowing that you won't describe me in terms of my fears and my doubts and my failures, what word would You speak to me that describes me in Your presence? Let Him minister to your spirit and breathe to you a word of assurance. "I give you a new name, an admission ticket to the messianic banquet, which no one knows, but the one who receives it."

Closing Prayer

We take these moments, Lord Jesus, in Your presence to hear You speak to us, to hear once again Your counsel. To hear You come to us and say, Take my word and let it cut out of Your life that which is not of Me. I must do it personally. We hear You speaking to us. Saying to us when we have compromised our faith, "Repent. Change. Put away the garments of the evening. Put off the flesh. Put on the inward nature renewed after the image of Christ Jesus. Put off lying and drunkenness and debauchery and immorality." All these things You said to that church You're saying to us. Yet You commend us and You hold before us great and exceeding promises and You put before us that prospect of life with You. Stamp Your own image deep on our hearts, Lord Jesus. Continually make us aware of the treasure we have in being an individual person in Your presence. Worshipping You not just as a congregation but worshipping You as a solitary being, created in Your image to know You, to praise You, to be loved and to love You. Let this day be a day of reassurance to every heart of Your faithful love. In Jesus' name. Amen.