

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 28, Number 3

January 15, 2012



God's Message to Seven Churches: Pergamos: Commendations

And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. (Revelation 2:12-13, KJV 1900)

Pergamos in the first century was known for three major cultural or commercial features. The city was the center of numerous pagan religions, including the growing trend of emperor worship. This new cultural trend would prove to be one of the most threatening to Christians of the first century, for refusal to worship the Roman emperor often brought charges of treason and death upon those who stood faithfully in their faith. Second, the city was home of a university and a large library, so it was viewed as a center of learning. Third, the city was a leading producer of parchment.

It is interesting that emperor worship was enforced by Roman civil authorities with the power of the sword, but Jesus starts this letter to the church there with a reminder that He also had a sword (Revelation 1:16). While the Roman sword was held in the soldiers' hands, Jesus' sword came out of His mouth. His mere words were capable of far more power than any sword held in a soldier's hand.

I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is.... The passage doesn't enlarge on the idea of Satan's seat, so we must seek the most likely and logical meaning, but we should begin with the thought that the people in the Pergamos Church who first heard this letter read to them likely understood immediately what John had in mind. Given the prevalence of pagan worship in the city, including the new paganism of emperor worship, it is likely that this is the point of the term, Satan's seat.

I have spent most of my life in southern California. More than once, I have complained that the local culture of this region is not a "Friendly" place for our faith. Historically, our churches have struggled in this region. When I first moved here in 1962, there were over ten churches in the region. Today there are only three. The culture didn't destroy those churches; the people in those churches who tried to bring the sinful culture around them into the church brought about death from within the churches.

As I ponder the Holy Spirit's letter to Pergamos and try to draw from its truth for present application to the world in which I live, a troubling thought occurs to me. There are no truly "Friendly" places for godly, Bible-believing churches. The problem

within a church is not the culture in which the church exists, but the culture within the church. How much of the world in which we live do we allow to invade our church? The more we allow the culture to mold us the more we take that culture into the church every time we go there, and that culture strives, aggressively so, to take root in churches and to "Root" out any sound Biblical influence it finds. So the troubling problem we face is not about the culture in which we live, but the culture that we permit to live in us. A godly church can exist and do well in the shadow of "Satan's seat," but that same church will suffer and fail if she allows the culture of Satan's seat to invade the church.

...and thou holdest fast my name.... A person's name becomes that person's identity. Despite some major problems that the Holy Spirit spotlighted in this letter, the core of the Pergamos Church still held tightly to her identity with the Lord Jesus Christ, not with the growing number of pagan deities that were worshipped all around her.

And in that day seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, We will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name, to take away our reproach. (Isaiah 4:1 KJV)

Did you notice the reason these women wanted the Lord's "Name"? "...to take away our reproach." They had no love or respect for Him. They weren't interested in His food or apparel. They only wanted His "Name," His identity, to avoid the consequences of their ongoing and active sinful conduct, their "reproach." Among other words, the definition of the Hebrew word translated "Reproach" in this verse includes "Disgrace" and "Shame." These unnamed women in Isaiah's prophecy have no interest in the honor of the Lord. They certainly have no interest in taking onto themselves the integrity of His character. They seek to continue in their own way, but to cover it with the cloak of His "Name." These ladies would not have fit well at all in the Pergamos Church. She wanted His name for His name's sake.

Paul confronts the insidious nature of false teaching and its power to influence unstable believers.

Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. (2 Timothy 2:18-19 KJV)

Preachers seldom are able to convert false teachers, but they should labor passionately to save believers from those false teachers. Paul's focus in this lesson is on God and His sure foundation, a foundation that false teachers and their insidious errors cannot erode, even in the weak believers whose faith they overthrow, and on the focus of the gospel to those weak believers. A false teacher may overthrow the faith of a weak believer, but he cannot overthrow God's eternal purpose to secure that little child in eternal glory. No false teacher can negate the merit of Jesus' atoning sacrifice, paid for all of God's elect and fully securing their eternal life with God, their Savior. However, Paul does not stop with that point. He adds a point that we should always emphasize as we teach our Lord's lambs and sheep. "*Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.*" These words would have rebuked those ladies in Isaiah 4. You can't legitimately claim His name unless you also depart from iniquity.

...and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you.... Even when faced with torturous martyrdom, these people would not deny their faith. Perhaps the two most powerful influences in the human experience—apart from God—are peer pressure and self-preservation. In a Pergamos-kind of culture, both of these pressures would weigh heavily and constantly on anyone who refused to join the pagan parade. We comfortably and safely attend our church's gatherings and, at least in the setting of other believers, talk freely about our faith. How much do you say about your faith—and, more importantly, the Lord of your faith—in other settings?

We who have lived in the American culture have little sense of what martyrdom means for one's faith. We may have read Foxe's ***Book of Martyrs*** or some other writing that narrates the sufferings of Christians in far distant lands and far distant times. We read these accounts almost as if they were a fairy tale, not a true account of real people who suffered intensely, lost their possessions, and eventually their lives for the simple reason that they stood firmly for their Lord and for their faith. A few years ago, I visited with a man whose family lived in Iran. A devoted Christian, this man tried to visit his family every summer (He was a teacher). He talked of first-hand observations of the reality in our present world of Christians who live and suffer in non-Christian cultures. And these suffering Christians are not fairy tales. They are alive today,

and they suffer today. We should pray daily for these suffering saints.

We do not find Antipas in any other writing, so what we know of him appears in this brief reference in our study passage. We know that he was killed for his faith, and we know that he remained faithful to his faith in the heat of persecution. In this brief reference, the Holy Spirit holds this unknown saint up before us as a noble example to nudge us to be just as faithful in our "Easy-Street" setting as he was when required to give his life for his faith. For Antipas and other believers in these seven churches, "Be thou faithful unto death..." was not a metaphor or a hyperbole. It was a realistic potential. How faithfully would you and I hold to our faith if confronted with the possibility of such consequences?

...where Satan dwelleth. We first read of Satan's seat, and here we read of his dwelling. Satan seems to have found a city where he was quite at home, perhaps even a welcomed citizen of the city. That culture presented the Pergamos Church with major threats. However, because this church was protected by Him "*...which hath the sharp sword with two edges...*" she could worship with joy and with confidence in her Savior and Protector. As we shall find in our next study, the real danger to Pergamos Church was not that she existed in such a city, but that she might give Satan a "seat" in the pews—or the pulpits—of the church. Satan in the world poses little threat to godly churches. Satan in the pew or in the pulpit endangers a church's survival.

We do not ordinarily find people in a church who outright desert their faith and continue in the church. The danger to Pergamos, and the danger to a godly church today, appears when members of the church allow the sinful world around them to compromise their faith and their conduct. Satan doesn't walk into the church in a red suit with a three-pronged spear in his hands. He cloaks himself through influencing people in the church to follow the example of the seven women in Isaiah 4, to compromise their faith through the influence of false teachers who claim to have greater knowledge of the truth of God than they know, and thereby overthrow and shipwreck the faith of weak believers. Simply stated, Satan goes to church in the guise of compromised believers, and he uses them to spread His influence within the church's culture. We can survive "*...where Satan's seat...*" is, but we can't survive when we give him a "Seat" in the church. Be vigilant in your guard against the voices that whisper in your ear, "Yea, hath God said...." That same voice will nudge you with "Do you really believe that verse? Do you really believe that doctrine?" The subtle and eroding "Do you really believe..." becomes Satan's fertile soil to put naïve and self-focused believers on the slippery slope of shipwrecked and overthrown faith. God's remedy: Keep your heart focused on Him with the sword of His Word. "Be thou faithful unto death."

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor