

## “Slip Sliding Away” (Revelation 2:12-17)

When I was growing up in Bremerton, WA, down the street from our house was a hill called East 30<sup>th</sup>. East 30<sup>th</sup> overlooked Seattle and provided one of the most scenic views you could imagine. But for the neighborhood kids and me we could care less about the view. We appreciated this hill for the snow-sledding it afforded us.

Whenever we had a good snow, my brother Tim and I would tromp to the top of East 30<sup>th</sup> and prepare to slide down. We would use sleds or what I call snow saucers. The interesting thing is: once we began our descent, we would travel rather slowly. Actually, it often took someone to push us so that we could get some momentum. But about a quarter of the way down we would always pick up steam and roar down the hill like a speeding bullet. Of course, we needed one of the neighborhood kids at the bottom of the hill so that we didn't have a head-on collision with an oncoming car. We had enough trouble staying under control without worrying about being killed.

Sin is like East 30<sup>th</sup>. It is a very slippery slope. It all begins rather innocently and gradually but it can quickly lead the Christian into an out-of-control, slip sliding away experience. In Rev 2:12-17, we will see how to overcome the sin of compromise.

**1. Commission (2:12a).** As with the other letters in Rev 2-3, the letter to the church in Pergamum is addressed to the angel of the church (2:12a). “**Pergamum**” means marriage.<sup>1</sup> This church was married to Christ. However, in spite of their union, they were tolerating compromise in some of their members. Compromise is the cancer of the church.<sup>2</sup>

**2. Character (2:12b).** Christ says that He is “**the One who has the sharp two-edged sword**” (cf. Isa 11:4).<sup>3</sup> By using this description Jesus makes it especially difficult for us to ignore this letter.<sup>4</sup> In Rev 1:16 and 19:15, the “**sword**” (*romfaia*)<sup>5</sup> is described as proceeding out of the mouth of Christ. The mouth, an instrument of speech, portrays this as the Word of Christ. In Rev 19:13 Christ is called the Word of God and then, in 19:15, we have the statement about the sword that proceeds out of His mouth and by which He will slay the wicked.

Interestingly, John 5:24f and 12:48 teach us that Christ's acts of judgment will be carried out on the basis of His Word. It seems clear the sword coming out of Christ's mouth is a reference to the Word and is a symbol of its truth, penetrating power and authority, severity, and the fact that Christ judges men on the basis of the Word. Thus, the sword of God's Word separates believers from the world and sinners from God. This is perhaps its double-edged quality.

**3. Commendation (2:13).** The exalted Christ knows three things about the church in Pergamum. First, Jesus knows that this church lives in Satan's hometown. In the space of one verse Jesus acknowledges that Satan's throne and his dwelling are in Pergamum. What a place to live! How would you like to be a realtor in Pergamum? Whew!

Apparently, Pergamum was the center of idolatry (i.e., emperor worship). It is important to recognize that idolatry is not only worshipping Satan or another false god. An idol is anything that takes the place of God. Therefore, whenever false worship occurs, Satan is involved (cf. 1 Cor 10:20; 12:2). This means that idolatry is really an expression of satanism.

How are you worshipping Satan? How have you erected an idol in your life that has distracted you? How has your affection toward God been stunted?

The second area of Christ's knowledge centered on the faithful witness of the Pergamum believers. Jesus says that they continued to **"hold fast My name."** The verb **"hold fast"** (*krateo*) means to "grasp forcibly" or, in this figurative use, "to remain firm." In 2:1, Jesus "holds the seven stars" as He watches over the churches and here the believers "hold fast" to His name. **"My name"** points to their adherence to the deity of Christ. In the midst of a pluralist society the church refused to bow the knee to false gods.

Several years ago talk show host Larry King was asked: "If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?" Mr. King's answer was that he would like to interview Jesus Christ. When the questioner followed with, "And what would you like to ask Him?" King replied, "I would like to ask Him if He was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me."<sup>6</sup>

Mr. King is right! Human history is defined by whether or not Jesus Christ is God. If you believe that Jesus Christ is indeed God, it will change your worldview and your actions. If He is not God then you might as well live for yourself and forget about eternal things.

The third area of Christ's knowledge is their endurance under persecution.<sup>7</sup> The believers in Pergamum were suffering for Christ. As a result, Antipas (one of their own) was martyred. Yet, in spite of the grave danger of naming the name of Christ, Pergamum persevered in their faith, refusing to deny her Lord.

What an inspiration Antipas must have been to this church. He would not cower to the political correctness of his day and was executed for his faith. Antipas means "against all." This godly man lived up to his name. He stood against paganism. What a wonderful benediction is pronounced upon this martyr.<sup>8</sup> He is called **"My witness, My faithful one."** This is especially encouraging for these are the same terms used of Jesus in Rev 1:5. In dying a martyr's death Antipas was indeed Christ-like (cf. Acts 22:20). As such, he receives the designation "My witness, My faithful one." Please notice the emphasis is upon being **"faithful"** in our witness. We are called to witness for Christ with our lives and our lips. Yet ultimately we are to leave the results up to Him. How would you like Jesus Christ to call you by that description?

**4. Condemnation (2:14-15).** The tone of praise for the church quickly disappeared, however, as Jesus moved on to speak of the state of the church (2:14-15). Jesus begins His rebuke the same way He did the church at Ephesus (see Rev 2:4). The only difference is instead of saying, "I have this against you"; Jesus says, **"I have a few things against you."** This ought to send chills up our spine. It should grab us by the lapels and jerk us to attention.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus then goes on to say that the church has **"some there who hold the teaching of Balaam who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality."** Jesus is saying that the problem was not external it was internal. A small group of people were teaching false doctrine. Typically, this is how it begins. Then rather quickly, the movement picks up some momentum and begins to spread. As Paul said, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (1 Cor 5:6).

The teaching of Balaam was to encourage the eating of foods sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality (2:14). The story of Balaam is found in Num 22-25 and 31. Balaam was an Old Testament prophet, a Gentile who knew God. He was called to be a mouthpiece for God but often spoke for the Devil. During the time of Israel's wilderness wanderings, God's chosen people defeated the Ammonites, and Moab looked surely to be the next to fall. When Balak the king of Moab received a report that the Israelites were advancing his way, he knew there was no way his army could defeat Israel. In desperation Balak called on Balaam for help. The Moabite king said, "I've got an assignment for you. I want you to curse these people. And I'll make it worth your while."

Yielding to the temptation, Balaam sold his gift. He became a “gun for hire,” a “prophet for profit.” Three separate times he tried to curse the people of God. But each time, only blessings—not cursings—came out. Try as he may Balaam could not curse the people of God. So Balaam became frustrated. He tried to serve God and money at the same time but he discovered that he couldn’t serve two masters (Luke 16:13). Under mounting pressure, Balaam devised an ingenious plan. If he couldn’t curse them, his only hope was to get God to do so. So Balaam hatched an insidious plot.

The “prophet for profit” would teach Balak to put stumbling blocks<sup>10</sup> before the sons of Israel. He instructed the corrupt king to place sensuous women before the marching Israelite army. Let these beautiful women tempt and lure God’s people into sin. God would then judge them for their disobedience. Balak did as Balaam suggested, placing enticing Moabite women before the Israelite men. The sons of Israel were no match for this temptation. They wilted under the seductive power and decided to party with these pagan women. Soon they went to church with these heathen women and worshipped their idols. They even brought sacrifices to their pagan gods and ate meat offered to idols in pagan ceremonies. The result was devastating: Israel fell into this terrible sin and God went to war against them. In doing so, He slew 24,000 Israelite men!<sup>11</sup>

What Balaam couldn’t do to harm Israel, sin did! Since Balaam’s plan was successful the prophet became a prototype of all corrupt teachers who betrayed believers into fatal compromise (see also 2 Pet 2:12-17; Jude 10-13). In the case of the church at Pergamum, deterioration began with their participation in the meals that were commonly held to honor heathen gods (2:14b). The food served at these celebrations was frequently the leftovers of pagan sacrifices. By eating this food the Christians were becoming “sharers in demons” (1 Cor 10:20). Furthermore, involvement in these pagan festivities made it easier to indulge in sexual intercourse with temple priestesses who prostituted themselves for the gods that they served (2:14b). In short, some of the Pergamum Christians had compromised their faith by allowing themselves to mix with pagan practices.

In 2:15, Jesus says, “**So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**” The word “**so**” (*houtos*) ties these two verses together. The adverb “**you also**”<sup>12</sup> points to the fact that the ancient “**teaching of Balaam**” and the contemporary teachings of the Nicolaitans were one in the same.<sup>13</sup> The repetition of the word “**hold**” in 2:14-15 also substantiates this. Jesus is saying, “In the same way that Balaam subverted the Israelites, these false teachers are trying to subvert you.”<sup>14</sup>

The two primary errors of the Nicolaitans had to do with eating things sacrificed to idols and immorality. Most likely the problem was not the buying of meat offered to idols, which was sold in the market place, but in joining pagan neighbors in a meal, which involved the sacrifice of the meat to idols (cf. 1 Cor 10:14-22). It may well be that immorality was also associated with these religious feasts. The pagans felt that they could have a relationship with the gods by having sexual relations with the religious cult prostitutes. What at first may have appeared to be merely accepting the hospitality of a neighbor resulted in the Christian being defiled morally and spiritually.

Notice that the church is not accused of holding to such doctrine and practice (here the term “doctrine” includes both) as a whole, but is condemned for tolerating it to be held by some. While “**some**” are guilty of moral and spiritual defilement, the rest are guilty of tolerating such sin. Just as the church at Corinth failed to deal with the immorality in its congregation (1 Cor 5), so the church at Pergamum was tolerating sin within its members. Bad “**teaching**” (2:14-15) always leads to bad living.<sup>15</sup>

The church in Pergamum stands in stark contrast to the church in Ephesus. Our Lord could commend the saints at Ephesus because they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans (2:6), while the church at Pergamum was willing to let it go on unchallenged. They probably tolerated impurity in the name of love. Does this sound familiar?

Many churches are making this tragic mistake today. They refuse to uphold the standards of God's Word. Rather, they believe that love, acceptance, and tolerance are more important than what God has declared. Now I'm a sensitive guy and I love people. In my sinful flesh I would join these ranks. But the new man in me loves God's Word—it alone is truth! If that isn't motivation enough, remember: He wields a sharp two-edged sword!

**5. Correction (2:16).** The word **“therefore”** (*oun*) refers back to the acts of idolatry and immorality. Jesus calls the church of Pergamum to **“repent.”** Five of the seven churches are called to repent (Smyrna and Philadelphia are exceptions). Biblical repentance involves changing one's mind in a way that affects some change in the person. It is important to note that the call to repent is addressed to everyone in the church. We all bear responsibility for the sins of one or a few.<sup>16</sup> When sin takes place we are called to repent on behalf of the sin of our people (see Neh 1).

For Pergamum, or any other church that refuses to repent, Jesus follows up with an **“or else”** statement: **“or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.”** This is intense! This is a threat and a promise. Jesus doesn't wink at compromise. He doesn't say, “That's okay. I've got unlimited grace and unending forgiveness, so it doesn't matter how you live.” He says, **“I'm coming to you quickly.”** Jesus isn't referring to the rapture; He's referring to a rupture.<sup>17</sup> Jesus will rumble with His church! He actually says so! He says, **“I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.”** The change from **“you”** to **“them”** indicates that Jesus will not wage war on all Christians in a church marked by disobedience. Rather, He will severely judge those who are personally involved in tolerating theological or practical compromise (see 1 Cor 11:27-34).

The church **MUST** deal with its sin or else Jesus will come and deal with the church. Either the church will discipline its sinning members or else Jesus will come and make war with His sword. And no church wants to be on the short end of that sword. What a wake-up call! Being tolerant of doctrinal deviations makes the entire church, especially the leadership, as guilty as those who teach and hold to this false doctrine. Idolatry and immorality will not be tolerated in the church. Either the church will deal with the sin, or Jesus will. But it will be dealt with!<sup>18</sup>

In what ways are you involved in compromise: doctrine, finances, marriage, honesty, business, morals? Keep in mind these two truths: first, the most deadly sins do not leap upon us; they creep up on us. Second, give sin an inch and it will take a mile. Compromise can be deadly!

**6. Challenge (2:17).** **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** Jesus again appeals to the individual for spiritual change. This serves as a reminder that the spiritual caliber of a church begins with the individuals who make up the church. Stop and think about that for a moment. If the effectiveness of our church rested on you alone, how would our church fare?

Jesus closes with two important blessings to the overcomer. First, Jesus says, **“To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna.”**<sup>19</sup> In the Old Testament, manna stood for God's faithfulness to provide and sustain His people through the wilderness wanderings.<sup>20</sup> In place of leeks, melons, garlic, and onions, Jesus rained down corn flakes from heaven. As a memorial to God's faithfulness, a portion of the manna was placed and thus hidden in the Ark of the Covenant (Exod 16:32-34; Heb 9:4).<sup>21</sup> Israel took some of the manna, put it in a jar, and then put the jar inside the Holy of Holies in the Ark of the Covenant to remind them that God had supplied their needs in the wilderness. No one knows the site of God's hidden supply of this special feast. But it's only for the overcomers. It is an invitation to throne room intimacy.

Jesus continues His thought in 2:17, and says, **“and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”** By repeating, **“I will give,”** there is an emphasis on the grace of the Savior and the second gift is highlighted as distinct from the first. Though rewards are promised for faithfulness they are still a matter of the grace of God, for it is by His grace and strength that we experience the capacity for faithfulness.

**“A white stone”** is perhaps the most difficult to interpret of all the rewards mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 because of the various uses of white stones and because no other passage tells us anything about white stones.<sup>22</sup> It seems best to understand this white stone like a personal gift. The word **“stone”** (*psephos*) may be used to designate a precious stone, like a diamond. This idea is supported in this verse by the **“white”** (*leuke*), which may mean more than just white and can be equivalent to “splendid, shining,” or even “glistening.”<sup>23</sup>

Many of you women have a beautiful, valuable stone on your left hand. In many cases, this rock hurt your fiancé’s pocketbook because he dug down deep to express his vast love for you. Yet now you have a symbol of his affection and love for you. Whenever you look down at your diamond you can remember your husband’s love for you. Well, Jesus our Bridegroom wants to express His love to members of His bride who have not compromised their love for Him. He wants to give them a precious stone that will be especially meaningful and will reveal His deep love and pleasure.

Jesus also says that a **“new name”**<sup>24</sup> will be written on this white stone which **“no one knows but he who receives it.”** Throughout Scripture a person’s name is significant. Names typically define a person. That’s why God changes peoples’ names so frequently. Abram’s name was changed to Abraham to portray the fact that he was to become the father of a multitude (Gen 17:1-8). Jacob, which means supplanter, was changed to Israel, the one over whom God would rule (Gen 32:27-29). Unstable Simon became Peter, the little rock (Matt 16:13-19). In the same vein, the overcoming believer is promised a new name, which demonstrates something of the character of the overcomer or something of his new responsibilities or both. This name shows something of what God has accomplished in his or her life through a walk of faith in faithfulness. The gift of this new name marks the believer’s entrance to a new and higher stage of responsibility symbolizing new and greater authority.<sup>25</sup>

I am called “Pastor” by many that know me. Friends call me “Keith.” My children call me “Daddy” or “Dad.” My parents call me “Son.” My brother calls me “Brother.” But Lori has a pet nickname for me that no one else knows. I will not share it with you. It’s reserved for us.

Jesus promises the overcomer a name like this. The Bridegroom will speak to His bride. He will have a tender name for her that shall not be known by anyone else.<sup>26</sup> Whatever rewards await the one who overcomes, I do know this: “things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Pergamum comes from the Greek word *gamos* (“marriage”).

<sup>2</sup> Evans writes, “Compromise is the cancer of the church and we must rid our Christ’s body of it. While Christians can compromise on preferences, they cannot compromise on principles. We can’t be one way on Sunday and another on Monday. This is a major problem among Christians in America today. We don’t take a stand. We don’t keep our standards. We merely shift to satisfy society.” Tony Evans, *The Victorious Christian Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 244.

<sup>3</sup> The “sword” draws from figurative language of the Old Testament in describing the power of the spoken word (see Ps 57:4; 64:3; Prov 12:18), in this case God’s Word. It also points forward to the time of Jesus’ future coming to planet earth as the conquering warrior of Rev 19:11-21 (see esp. 19:15).

<sup>4</sup> If Paul could say that Rome does not “bear the sword for nothing” (Rom 13:4) how much more should we fear the power of God?

<sup>5</sup> The word “sword” is mentioned a total of nine times in Revelation. *Romfaia* is mentioned five times and *makaira*, the short Roman two-edged sword, is mentioned four times. The *romfaia* was the long and heavy, broad sword used by the Thracians and other barbarous nations who often marched irresistibly over one country after another as God’s instruments of judgment. First of all, then, it symbolizes the irresistible authority and devastating force of our Lord’s judgment (cf. 19:15). Hampton Keathley III, *Studies in Revelation* (Biblical Studies Press, 1997),

<sup>6</sup> Preaching Today Citation: Ravi Zacharias, “Questions I Would Like to Ask God,” *Just Thinking Winter* (1998); submitted by Aaron Goerner, New Hartford, New York.

<sup>7</sup> The persecution that was yet future for Smyrna was already history for Pergamum.

<sup>8</sup> The word translated “witness” is the Greek word *martus* from which the English word “martyr” is derived. This is perhaps the earliest usage of “martyr” as denoting one who dies for his faith.

<sup>9</sup> Steven J. Lawson, *Final Call* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 119.

<sup>10</sup> A stumbling block (*skandalon*) is a trap set with a bait. When the bait is touched—boom—the trap is triggered, and it closes shut on its victim. That’s what sin is like. It looks alluring, but when it is touched, it captures its unsuspecting prey.

<sup>11</sup> See Lawson, *Final Call*, 119-120.

<sup>12</sup> This is emphatic in the Greek text.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, even the terms Nicolaitan and Balaam can mean the same thing (“conquer the people”).

<sup>14</sup> See Grant S. Osborne, *Revelation: ECNT* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 145.

<sup>15</sup> Heresy is a problem in the church. Not just in America but especially in the third world countries. That is one of China’s top prayer requests that heretical sects would not continue to raise up.

<sup>16</sup> This is a biblical principle that goes back to Achan (see Josh 7).

<sup>17</sup> Lawson, *Final Call*, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Lawson, *Final Call*, 125-126.

<sup>19</sup> The “hidden manna” is literally, “of the manna, the hidden.” It is a restrictive attributive, which defines the distinctive identity of the manna. With this construction, there is some emphasis on the hidden character of the manna. See Keathley III, *Studies in Revelation*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Manna was also called, “food from heaven” (Ps 78:24). In John 6:48-51, the Lord spoke of Himself as the true bread from heaven that gives eternal life in contrast with the manna in the Old Testament. He said, “your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died” (John 6:49). While the manna sustained their physical life for a time, it was only a picture of the one who would come and who would give life and life abundant (John 10:10).

<sup>21</sup> Trench calls our attention to the fact that it was after this manna was laid up in the Ark that it obtained the name “hidden.” Richard Chenevix Trench, *The Seven Churches* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978 [1897]), 143.

<sup>22</sup> Some seek to connect the “white stone” in some way to the promise of the hidden manna, the Ark of the Covenant, and the priesthood. Thus, it is seen as a diamond, which corresponds to the Urim and Thummim worn by the high priest, and would speak of special priestly prerogatives and access into the very presence of God. Others see an analogy to the stone awarded to victorious gladiators or warriors when they returned from battle. It would be much like a “well done” for service rendered. There was also a custom in John’s day in which special stones were given which entitled the bearer to special hospitality and friendship. There was also a Roman custom of awarding white stones to the victors in athletic contests. A white stone inscribed with the athlete’s name, served as his ticket to a special awards banquet. There were many customs and several possibilities for the meaning of the stone. Whatever, it clearly symbolized special blessing and privilege that will be given to those believers who overcome the influx of the world on their lives.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Matt 17:2; Rev 3:4, 5; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:14.

<sup>24</sup> Some commentators hold that the “new name” is a name of God or Christ (cf. Rev 3:12; 19:12). Yet, this is unlikely. Osborne writes, “It is hard to see how the name of God or Christ would be known only to the overcomer.” Osborne, *Revelation*, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps God will elevate the overcomer to the position of ruler over the earth and will give him or her a new name, as He did Joseph (cf. Gen 41:39-45). Regardless of the meaning, for our day when an impersonal number often identifies us, it highlights the fact we are not just impersonal numbers, but those who are personally known and loved by God.

<sup>26</sup> See Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 57.