

## Sermon – 03/12/2006 pm

### The Church at Pergamum

Study Text: Revelation 2:12-17

Who was the man whose donkey spoke to him, restraining him in his madness? Balaam! The background of this man is somewhat shadowy, but his name appears throughout Scripture. He was a soothsayer or prophet from the region of the Euphrates River. When the children of Israel entered the land of Moab on their way to Canaan, Balak the king of Moab hired Balaam to put a curse on Israel. But the Lord restrained him and all he could do was bless them.

Balak offered Balaam money and honour. Although he could not curse Israel he went and gave advice which led to their downfall. At Baal Peor the men of Israel were seduced by Moabite women. They engaged in sexual immorality and idolatry as they joined these women in worshipping their gods. The Lord's anger was aroused against Israel and some 24,000 died before he withdrew his hand of judgment (Numbers 25:3, 9). The name of Balaam became associated with people of God being seduced by the pleasures and treasures of the world.

### Satan's Throne

What was it like for Christians living in the city of Pergamum in the first century? Not unlike living in the so called holy cities of Mecca, Varanasi or the Vatican today! This city was away from the coast so was not a commercial centre like Ephesus. It was more of a political and religious capital. Pliny called it the most famous city of Asia. It was the seat of the Roman Governor and was probably the first city in Asia to erect a temple for Rome. Emperor worship arose in Pergamum and quickly spread to throughout the region. It had numerous temples to Greek gods as well. The risen Jesus called it Satan's throne.

Satan means 'adversary'. In Smyrna it was the Jews who were attacking the church from the *synagogue of Satan*. At Pergamum Satan's throne was probably the imperial throne which had come to demand emperor worship. Pliny, the governor of a nearby region, wrote of how Christian's were tested in that day. They were made to recite a prayer to the gods, offer incense and wine before the Emperor's statue and curse Christ.

Christians at Pergamum were dragged before the courts and put through such a test. But they held fast to the name of Christ and did not deny the faith (2:13). A man called Antipas who refused to worship the Emperor and deny Christ had paid the ultimate price. Antipas *was killed among you where Satan dwells*. He was a faithful witness or martyr (the Greek word can mean either). Antipas lost everything in this world, even his life, but he gained his heavenly reward.

Antipas was also honoured by having his name recorded in Scripture. His name must have encouraged the church at Pergamum to press on. Does it encourage you to know that Antipas, and many others, have been faithful witnesses for Christ even unto death? Under the altar in heaven John saw the *souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and the testimony which they held*...but the number was not yet completed (6:9-11). Are you ready to join them?

## Stumbling Block

While some in this church were being faithful unto death others were stumbling. They were compromising with the pagans in this city, joining them in their idolatry and immorality. While Ephesus was diligent in rejecting false teachers, Pergamum was not. We have here two extremes so often found in churches even today. There are those who are so focussed on doctrine that they show no love. Others are so focussed on love and warm feelings that they have little concern for Biblical truth. It does not have to be this way. We can and must have the truth with love.

Many in the church at Pergamum had converted from worshipping idols to worshipping only Jesus. They had turned from immorality, from frequenting temple prostitutes and the like to live morally upright lives. Sexual laxity was not considered a sin in Greek or Roman religions. But after some time they were being tempted to return to these old ways. Satan was tempting them through their own lusts and pressure from their friends. Moreover, false teachers in the church were condoning such immorality, probably in the name of Christian liberty.

A friend in India threw out all her household gods and worshipped only Jesus when she was saved. One day during a major Hindu festival she was walking along and noticed a holy man sitting by the roadside selling trinkets. She stopped and he gave her some holy beads, the sort she used to wear to appease the gods. He gave them free of charge. Later she was filled with fear not knowing what to do with these beads. She came to us, and we got rid of the beads and prayed for her restoration.

Christians today are being lured by Satan's lies. They toy with horoscopes, Yoga, diviners, clairvoyants and the like. Flee from idolatry; run as far and as a fast as you can from any temptation to worship false gods. Yes, such gods abound in our own society.

Feasts held in honour of various gods were common in Pergamum. The food was sumptuous and the festivities fun. But the food had been offered to idols. At the first church council held at Jerusalem, Christians were instructed to abstain from things offered to idols, from blood and from things strangled (Acts 15).

The apostle Paul understood that gods are nothing and that things we eat have no intrinsic spiritual effect. But still he knew how brothers could stumble in the matter of food. Moreover, he certainly did not sanction believers attending pagan festivals (I Corinthians 10:21). Christians cannot join with unbelievers in feasts associated with worship of other gods.

This is exactly what Israel did at Baal Peor at the instigation of Balaam. Beautiful foreign women invited them to their sumptuous pagan feast. The men could not resist the temptation. Christians at Corinth and at Pergamum faced the same temptation. Worship that appeals to the lust of the flesh is still around today. Teaching in the church that appeals to these lusts is always popular. The doctrine of Balaam is not dead. It is still one of Satan's chief strategies in his war against the church of Jesus Christ.

Nicolas it appears was someone who taught this doctrine of Balaam. He gave his name to a group within a number of churches in Asia. Beware of doctrines bearing the names of men. The Nicolaitans sanctioned compromise with the pagans. They twisted the Scriptures to teach that eating at pagan festivals and joining them in their sexual immorality was not wrong. They

probably proclaimed their liberty in this way, like the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 5). They sought to be 'all inclusive' and 'tolerant' Christians.

We still hear such teaching in churches today. They boast of how they accept everyone and tolerate all 'understandings' of the Bible. Take the question of homosexuality. They lead the way in accepting this sin in the church. They rush to ordain homosexual men and women. They not only tolerate but promote gross immorality. The church at Pergamum may not have been quite so degenerate.

### **Sword of the Lord**

The message to the church at Pergamum came, appropriately, from him *who has the sharp two-edged sword* coming out of his mouth (2:12). This was another feature of the vision John had of the risen Jesus. They were told to repent, to take action against those who hold the doctrine of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans. Such members must be disciplined and removed from the church, as was done at Ephesus. Paul told the church at Corinth not to keep company with sexually immoral people within the church (I Corinthians 5).

If they failed to do this the Lord would come quickly and fight against them with the sword of his mouth (2:16). Jesus himself would judge those who were compromising with the world. *For this reason many are weak and sick among you and many have died. For if we would judge ourselves we would not be judged.* This is what Paul write to the 'tolerant' church at Corinth (I Corinthians 11:30, 31).

Those who heard and obeyed this message were promised *some of the hidden manna to eat* (2:17). Rather than feasting with pagans they were to feast at the table of the Lord. Just as God satisfied their hunger in the desert with manna from heaven so he would give them the bread of life sent down from heaven (John 6:32f). Those who were faithful unto death were promised a place at the marriage supper of the Lamb. *Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb* (19:9).

They were also promised a white stone with a new name written on it. White stones were like tickets given to attend gladiatorial games in Pergamum. We are supposed to carry ID with us all the time these days. We need a ticket to get onto public transport and into various venues. We need a card plus a password to get money from the ATM, to buy things 'on line', to enter buildings and all manner of things. Only you are supposed to know your password. This is not to suggest that there will be some secret code for Christians one day. But the white stone may represent a ticket to this feast in heaven. Do you know the password? Look in Romans 10:9!

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