

# William Barclay's Daily Study Bible

## Revelation 2

### THE LETTER TO PERGAMUM (Revelation 2:12-17)

*2:12-17 And to the angel of the Church in Pergamum, write:*

*These things says he who has the sharp two-edged sword. I know where your home is. I know that it is where the throne of Satan is; and yet you hold fast to my name, and have not denied your loyalty to me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan has his home. But I have a few things against you. You have among you some people who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat meat offered to idols and to commit fornication. So you, too, have those who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So, then, repent. If you do not, I am coming to you quickly, and I will go to war with them with the sword of my mouth.*

*Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. To him who overcomes I will give a share of the hidden manna; and I will give him a white stone, and written on the stone a new name, which no one but him who receives it knows.*

### Pergamum, The Seat Of Satan (Revelation 2:12-17 Continued)

There is a difference in the name of this city in the different translations of the New Testament. The King James Version calls it Pergamos, while the English Revised Version, the Revised Standard Version and Moffatt call it Pergamum. Pergamos (**Greek #4010**) is the feminine form of the name and Pergamum the neuter. In the ancient world it was known by both forms but Pergamum was much the commoner and the newer translations are right to prefer it.

Pergamum had a place all its own in Asia. It was not on any of the great roads, as Ephesus and Smyrna were, but historically it was the greatest city in Asia. Strabo called it an illustrious (epiphanes, **Greek #2016**) city and Pliny called it "by far the most famous city in Asia" (longe clarissimum Asiae). The reason was that, by the time John was writing, Pergamum had been a capital city for almost four hundred years. Back in 282 B.C. it was made the capital of the Seleucid kingdom, one of the sections into which the empire of Alexander the Great was broken up. It remained the capital until 133 B.C. In that year Attalus the Third died and before he died he willed his dominions into the possession of Rome. Out of the dominions of Attalus, Rome formed the province of Asia and Pergamum still remained its capital.

Its geographical position made Pergamum even more impressive. It was built on a tall conical hill, which dominated the valley of the River Caicus, from the top of which the Mediterranean could be seen, fifteen miles away. Sir William Ramsay describes it: "Beyond all other cities in Asia Minor, it gives the traveller the impression of a royal city, the home of authority; the rocky hill on which it stands is so huge, and dominates the broad plain of the Caicus so proudly and so boldly." History and honour gathered around Pergamum. Let us then set down its outstanding characteristics.

(i) Pergamum could never achieve the commercial greatness of Ephesus or of Smyrna but it was a centre of culture which surpassed both. It was famous for its library, which contained no fewer than 200,000 parchment rolls. It was second only to the unique library of Alexandria.

It is interesting to note that the word parchment is derived from Pergamum (**Greek #4010**). In the ancient world parchment was the pergamene charta, the Pergamene sheet; and to this name attaches a story. For many centuries ancient rolls were written on papyrus, a substance made of the pith of a very large bulrush which grows beside the Nile. The pith was extracted, cut into strips, pressed into sheets and smoothed. There emerged a substance not unlike brown paper, and this was universally used for writing. In the third century B.C. a Pergamene king called Eumenes was very anxious to make the library of the city supreme. In order to do so he persuaded Aristophanes of Byzantium, the librarian at Alexandria, to agree to leave Alexandria and come to Pergamum. Ptolemy of Egypt, enraged at this seduction of his outstanding scholar, promptly imprisoned Aristophanes and by

way of retaliation put an embargo on the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Faced with this situation, the scholars of Pergamum invented parchment or vellum, which is made of the skins of beasts, smoothed and polished. In fact parchment is a much superior vehicle for writing and, although it did not do so for many centuries, it in the end ousted papyrus altogether as writing material.

(ii) Pergamum was one of the great religious centres. In particular it had two famous shrines. In the letter of the Risen Christ Pergamum is said to be the place where "Satan's seat" is. Obviously this must refer to something which the Christian Church regarded as particularly evil. Some have found the reference explained in Pergamum's religious splendour.

(a) Pergamum regarded itself as the custodian of the Greek way of life and of the Greek worship. About 240 B.C. it had won a great victory against the savage invading Galatae or Gauls. In memory of that victory a great altar to Zeus was built in front of the Temple of Athene which stood eight hundred feet up on Pergamum's conical hill. Forty feet high, it stood on a projecting ledge of rock and looked exactly like a great throne on the hillside. All day it smoked with the smoke of sacrifices offered to Zeus. Around its base was carved one of the greatest achievements in the world of sculpture, the frieze which showed the Battle of the Giants, in which the gods of Greece were victorious over the giants of the barbarians. It has been suggested that this great altar was Satan's seat. But it is unlikely that a Christian writer would call that altar Satan's seat, for even by this time the old Greek gods were anachronisms and it would have been a waste of the powder and shot of Christian invective to attack them.

(b) Pergamum was particularly connected with the worship of Asclepius, so much so that Asclepius was known as "the Pergamene god." When Galen was mentioning favourite oaths, he said that people commonly swore by Artemis of Ephesus, or Apollo of Delphi, or Asclepius of Pergamum. Asclepius was the god of healing and his temples were the nearest approach to hospitals in the ancient world. From all over the world people flocked to Pergamum for relief for their sicknesses. R. H. Charles has called Pergamum "the Lourdes of the ancient world." The task of healing was partly the work of the priests; partly the work of doctors--Galen, second only to Hippocrates in the medical history of the ancient world, was born in Pergamum; and partly the work of Asclepius himself. Was there anything in that worship to move the Christians to call the Temple of Asclepius Satan's seat? There may have been two things.

First, the commonest and most famous title for Asclepius was Asclepius Soter (**Greek #4990**), Asclepius the Saviour. It might well be that the Christians felt a shudder of horror that the name Saviour should be given to anyone other than Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

Second, the emblem of Asclepius was the serpent, which still appears on the cap badge of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Many of the coins of Pergamum have Asclepius' serpent as part of their design. It might well be that Jew or Christian might regard a religion which took the serpent as its emblem as a Satanic cult. Again this explanation seems unlikely. As has been pointed out, the Christians would regard the place where men went to be healed--and often were--with pity rather than with indignation. The worship of Asclepius surely would not give adequate ground for calling Pergamum Satan's seat.

It seems then that we must look elsewhere for the explanation of this phrase.

(iii) Pergamum was the administrative centre of Asia. That meant that it was the centre of Caesar worship for the province. We have already described Caesar worship and the dire dilemma in which it placed the Christian.

It was organized with a provincial centre and an administration like that of a presbytery or diocese. The point here is that Pergamum was the centre of that worship for the province of Asia. Undoubtedly that is why Pergamum was Satan's seat; it was the place where men were required on pain of death to take the name of Lord and give it to Caesar instead of to Christ; and to a Christian there could be nothing more Satanic than that.

And here is the explanation of the beginning of the letter to Pergamum. The Risen Christ is called he who has the sharp two-edged sword. Roman governors were divided into two classes--those who had the *ius gladii*, the right of the sword, and those who had not. Those who had the right of the sword had the power of life and death; on their word a man could be executed on the spot. Humanly speaking the proconsul, who had his headquarters at Pergamum, had the *ius gladii*, the right of the sword, and at any moment he might use it against any Christian; but the letter bids the Christian not to forget that the last word is still with the Risen Christ, who has the sharp two-edged sword. The power of Rome might be satanically powerful; the power of the Risen Lord is greater yet.

## Pergamum, An Engagement Very Difficult (Revelation 2:12-17 Continued)

To be a Christian in Pergamum was to face what Cromwell would have called "an engagement very difficult."

We have already seen what a concentration of pagan religion had its centre in Pergamum. There was the worship of Athene and Zeus, with its magnificent altar dominating the city; there was the worship of Asclepius, bringing sick people from far and near; and above all there were the demands of Caesar worship, hanging for ever like a poised sword above the heads of the Christians.

So the Risen Christ says to the Christians of Pergamum: "I know where you stay." The word for to stay is here katoikein (**Greek #2730**); and it means to have one's permanent residence in a place. It is a very unusual word to use of Christians in the world. Usually the word used of them is paroikein (**Greek #3939**), which means to be a sojourner. Peter writes his letter to the sojourners throughout the provinces of Asia Minor. But here the matter is being regarded from another point of view. The Christians of Pergamum have their permanent residence, so far as this world is concerned, in Pergamum; and Pergamum is the place where Satan's rule is strongest.

Here is something very important. The principle of the Christian life is not escape, but conquest. We may feel it would be very much easier to be a Christian in some other place and in some other circumstances but the duty of the Christian is to witness for Christ where life has set him. We once heard of a girl who was converted in an evangelistic campaign. A reporter on a secular newspaper, her first step after her conversion was to get a new job on a small Christian newspaper where she was constantly in the society of professing Christians. It was strange that the first thing that her conversion did was to make her run away. The more difficult it is to be a Christian in any set of circumstances, the greater the obligation to remain within these circumstances. If in the early days Christians had run away every time they were confronted with a difficult engagement, there would have been no chance of a world for Christ.

The Christians at Pergamum proved that it was perfectly possible to be a Christian under such circumstances. Even when martyrdom was in the air they did not flinch. Of Antipas we know nothing; there is a late legend in Tertullian that he met his death by being slowly roasted to death within a brazen bull. But there is a point in the Greek impossible to reproduce in English which is intensely suggestive. The Risen Christ calls Antipas my faithful martus (**Greek #3144**). We have translated that "martyr"; but martus (**Greek #3144**) is the normal Greek word for witness. In the early church to be a martyr and to be a witness were one and the same thing. Witness meant so often martyrdom. Here is a rebuke to us. So many are prepared to demonstrate their Christianity in Christian circles but are equally prepared to play it down in circles where Christianity is met with opposition.

We must note another thing. The Risen Christ calls Antipas my faithful martus (**Greek #3144**) and so gives him nothing less than his own title. In Revelation 1:5 and Revelation 3:14 Christ himself is called the faithful martus (**Greek #3144**); to those who are true to him he gives nothing less than his own name.

## Pergamum, The Doom Of Error (Revelation 2:12-17 Continued)

In spite of the fidelity of the Church at Pergamum there is error. There are those who hold the teaching of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. We have already discussed these people in connection with Ephesus and we meet them again when we come to study the letter of Thyatira. They sought to persuade Christians that there was nothing wrong with a prudent conformity to the world's standards.

The man who is not prepared to be different need not start on the Christian way at all. The commonest word for the Christian in the New Testament is hagios (**Greek #40**) whose basic meaning is different or separate. The Temple is hagios (**Greek #39**) because it is different from other buildings; the Sabbath day is hagios (**Greek #40**) because it is different from other days; God is supremely hagios (**Greek #40**) because he is totally different from men; and the Christian is hagios (**Greek #40**) because he is different from other men.

We must be clear what this difference means, for there is a paradox in it. It is Paul's summons to the Corinthians that they should be different from the world. "Come out from among them" (2 Corinthians 6:17). This difference from the world does not involve separation from it nor hatred for it. Paul says in writing to the very same Church: "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). It was Paul's claim that he could get alongside all men; but--and here is the point--his getting alongside them was that he might save

some. It was not a question of bringing Christianity down to their level; it was a question of bringing them up. The fault of the Nicolaitans was that they were following a policy of compromise solely to save themselves from trouble.

It is the word of the Risen Christ that he will make war with them. We must note that he did not say: "I will go to war with you"; he said: "I will go to war with them." His wrath was not directed against the whole Church but against those who were seducing her; for those who were led astray, he had nothing but pity.

It is the threat of the Risen Christ that he will make war against them with the sword of his mouth. The Christ of the sword is a startling idea. Thinking of past conquerors and comparing them with Jesus Christ, the poet wrote:

Then all these vanished from the scene,  
Like flickering shadows on a glass;  
And conquering down the centuries came  
The swordless Christ upon an ass.

What then is the sword of Christ? The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the word of God which is sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). Paul speaks of "the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17). The sword of Christ is the word of Christ.

In the word of Christ there is conviction of sin; in it a man is confronted with the truth and thereby with his own failure to obey it. In the word of Christ there is invitation to God; it convicts a man of sin and then invites him back to the love of God. In the word of Christ there is assurance of salvation; it convicts a man of sin, it leads him to the Cross, and it assures him that there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). The conquest of Christ is his power to win men to the love of God.

Pergamum, The Bread Of Heaven (Revelation 2:12-17 Continued)

In this letter the Risen Christ promises two things to the man who overcomes; the first is a share of the hidden manna to eat. Here is a Jewish conception which has two aspects.

(i) When the children of Israel had no food in the desert God gave them manna to eat (Exodus 16:11-15). When the need of the manna passed, the memory did not. A pot of the manna was put into the ark and laid up before God in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and in the Temple (Exodus 16:33-34; Hebrews 9:4). Early in the sixth century B.C. the Temple which Solomon had built was destroyed; and the rabbis had a legend that, when that happened, Jeremiah hid away the pot of manna in a cleft in Mount Sinai and that, when the Messiah came, he would return and the pot of manna would be discovered again. To a Jew "to eat of the hidden manna" meant to enjoy the blessings of the Messianic age. To a Christian it meant to enter into the blessedness of the new world which would emerge when the Kingdom came.

(ii) There may be a wider and more general meaning. Of the manna it is said: "This is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat" (Exodus 16:15). The manna is called "grain of heaven" (Psalms 78:24); and it is said to be the "bread of the angels," (Psalms 78:25). Here the manna may mean heavenly food. In that case John would be saying: "In this world you cannot share with the heathen in their feasts because you cannot sit down to meat which is part of a sacrifice that has been offered to an idol. You may think that you are being called upon to give up much but the day will come when you will feast in heaven upon heavenly food." If that is so, the Risen Christ is saying that a man must abstain from the seductions of earth if he wishes to enjoy the blessings of heaven.

(iii) There is one possible further interpretation of this. Some have suggested that the hidden manna is the bread of God given to the Christian at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. John tells us that when the Jews said to him that their fathers had eaten manna in the wilderness, so receiving bread, and Jesus said "I am the bread of life" (John 6:31-35). If the hidden manna and the bread of life are the same, the hidden manna is not only the bread of the sacrament but stands for nothing less than Christ, the bread of life; and this is a promise that to him who is faithful he will give himself.

Pergamum, The White Stone And The New Name (Revelation 2:12-17 Continued)

The final promise of Christ to the faithful in Pergamum is that he will give them the white stone with the new name on it. This is a passage of which there are almost endless interpretations. In the ancient world a white stone might stand for many things.

(i) There was a Rabbinic legend that precious stones fell from heaven along with the manna. The white stone would then simply stand for the precious gifts of God to his people.

(ii) In the ancient world coloured stones were used as counters for working out calculations. This would mean that the Christian is counted among the number of the faithful.

(iii) In the ancient law courts white and black stones were used for registering the verdict of juries, black for condemnation, white for acquittal. This would mean that the Christian is acquitted in the sight of God because of the work of Jesus Christ.

(iv) In the ancient world objects called tesserae were much used. A tessera was a little tablet made of wood or metal or stone; it had writing on it; and, generally speaking, the possession of a tessera conferred some kind of privilege upon a man. Three of these tesserae add something to the picture.

(a) In Rome the great houses had their clients, dependents who every morning received from their patron food and money for the day. They were often given a tessera by which they identified themselves as having the right to the free gifts. This would mean that the Christian has the right to the free gifts for life which Christ can give.

(b) To win a victory at the games was one of the greatest honours the ancient world could give. Outstanding victors were given, by the master of the games, a tessera which in the days to come conferred upon them the right of free entry to all public spectacles. This would mean that the Christian is the victorious athlete of Christ who is a sharer in the glory of his Lord.

(c) In Rome a great gladiator was the admired hero of all. Often a gladiator had to fight on until he was killed in combat. But if he had had a specially illustrious career, when he grew old, he was allowed to retire in honour. Such men were given a tessera with the letters "SP" on it. "SP" stands for the Latin word spectatus, which means a man whose valour has been proved beyond a doubt. This would mean that the Christian is the gladiator of Christ and that, when he has proved his valour in the battle of life, he is allowed to enter into the rest which Christ gives with honour.

(v) In the ancient world a specially happy day was called a white day. Plutarch tells that when Pericles was besieging Samos he knew that the siege would be long; he did not wish his army to grow weary; so he divided it into eight parts; every day the eight companies drew lots; one was a white bean; and the company which drew the white bean was exempt from duty for the day and could enjoy itself as it wished. So it was that a happy day came to be called a white day (Plutarch: Life of Pericles 64). Pliny in one of his letters tells a friend that that day he had had the joy of hearing in the law courts two magnificent young pleaders in whose hands the future of Roman oratory was safe; and, he says, that experience made that day one marked candidissimo calculo, with the whitest of stones (Pliny: Letters 6: 11). It was said that the Thracians and the Scythians kept in their homes an urn into which for every happy day they threw a white stone and for every unhappy day a black stone; at the end of their lives the stones were counted, and as the white or the black preponderated, a man was said to have had a wretched or a happy life. This would mean that through Jesus Christ the Christian can have the joy that no man takes from him (John 16:22).

(vi) Along this line there is another and most likely interpretation. One of the commonest of all customs in the ancient world was to carry an amulet or charm. It might be made of a precious metal or a precious stone but often it was nothing more than a pebble. On the pebble there was a sacred name; to know a god's name was to have a certain power over him, to be able to summon him to one's aid in time of difficulty and to have mastery over the demons. Such an amulet was thought to be doubly effective, if no one other than the owner knew the name that was inscribed upon it. Most likely what John is saying is: "Your heathen friends--and you did the same in your heathen days--carry amulets with superstitious inscriptions on them and they think they will keep them safe. You need nothing like that; you are safe in life and in death because you know the name of the only true God."

Pergamum, Renamed By God (Revelation 2:12-17 Continued)

It is just possible that we ought to look for the meaning of the new name and the white stone in another direction altogether.

The words white and new are characteristic of the Revelation. R. H. Charles has said that in the Revelation "white is the colour and livery of heaven." The word used does not describe a dull, flat whiteness but one which glistens like snow in the winter sun. So in the Revelation we find white garments (Revelation 3:5); white robes (Revelation 7:9); white linen (Revelation 19:8; Revelation 19:14); and the great white throne of God himself (Revelation 20:11). White, then, is heaven's colour.

In Greek there are two words for "new." There is neos (**Greek #3501**), which means new in point of time. A thing can be neos (**Greek #3501**), and yet exactly like any number of things. On the other hand there is kainos (**Greek #2537**), which is new not only in point of time but also in point of quality; nothing like it has ever been made before. So in the Revelation there is the new Jerusalem (Revelation 3:12); the new song (Revelation 5:9); the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21:1); and God makes all things new (Revelation 21:5). With this in mind two lines of thought have been suggested.

It has been suggested that the white stone is the man himself; that the Risen Christ is promising his faithful ones a new self, cleansed of all earthly stains and glistening with the purity of heaven.

As to the new name, one of the features of the Old Testament is the giving to a man of a new name to mark a new status. So Abram becomes Abraham when the great promise is made that he will be the father of many nations and when he, as it were, acquires a new status in the plan of God for men (Genesis 17:5). So after the wrestling at Peniel, Jacob becomes Israel, which means the prince of God, because he had prevailed with God (Genesis 32:28). Isaiah hears the promise of God to the nation of Israel: "The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will give" (Isaiah 62:2).

This custom of giving a new name to mark a new status was known in the heathen world as well. The name of the first of the Roman Emperors was Octavius; but when he became Emperor he was given the name Augustus to mark his new status.

A curious superstitious parallel to this comes from peasant life in Palestine. When a person was very ill and in danger of death, he was often given the name of someone who had lived a long and saintly life, as if this turned him into a new person over whom the illness might lose its power.

On this basis of interpretation, Christ promises a new status to those who are faithful to him.

This is attractive. It suggests that the white stone means that Jesus Christ gives to the man who is true to him a new self and that the new name means the new status of glory into which the man who has been true to Christ will enter when this life ends and when the next begins. It remains to say that, attractive as that interpretation is, the view which traces back the white stone and the new name to the use of amulets is more likely to be correct.

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