Part I
The Seven Letters
Revelation 1–3

Letter to Pergamos

Pergamum: The Worldly Church

**Letter to Pergamos**

- “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

- But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

- Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’” (Revelation 2:12–17, ESV)

**Letter to Pergamos**

- For many people in today's church, the term *worldliness* has a quaint, old-fashioned ring to it. They associate it with prohibitions against things like dancing, going to the movies, or playing cards. Today's user-friendly, seeker-oriented, market-driven church doesn't preach much against worldliness. To do so might make unbelievers (not to mention many believers) uncomfortable, and is therefore avoided as poor marketing strategy.

**Letter to Pergamos**

- But unlike much of the contemporary church, the Bible does not hesitate to condemn worldliness for the serious sin that it is. Worldliness is any preoccupation with or interest in the temporal system of life that places anything perishable before that which is eternal. Since believers are not part of the world system (*John 15:19*), they must not act as though they were. "Do not be conformed to this world," wrote the apostle Paul, "but be transformed by the
renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2).

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Because they have been redeemed by God's grace, believers are called to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12). "Pure and undefiled religion," notes James, consists in keeping "oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27), because "friendship with the world is hostility toward God[.] Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). First John 2:15-17 makes the believer's duty to avoid worldliness unmistakably clear:

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The church at Pergamum, like much of today's church, had failed to heed the biblical warnings against worldliness. Consequently, it had drifted into compromise and was in danger of becoming intertwined with the world. That would be the next step in the downward spiral from the Ephesian church's loss of its first love for Jesus Christ.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Pergamos, called Bergama today, was about twenty miles from the sea and about a three day journey north of Smyrna, located today in what is known as Turkey. It was known for its wealth and fashion. The silent witnesses of its wealth exist today as an incredible number of white marble pillars and blocks can still be seen. Many kings made it their place of royal residence.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - It was mainly known for its religions and idolatry. Eating meat dedicated to idols was a key problem that Christians faced in this city. Some of the chief deities that were worshiped there were Zeus, Aphrodite, and Aesculapius, the serpent god of medicine.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The temple of Aesculapius had medical awards and was the most famous medical school in the world. His emblem was a serpent that was intertwined on a staff and could have been a reference to Satan's throne mentioned in this passage. Sufferers spent nights in the darkness of the temple where there were tame snakes. Those who were sick came from miles around and were hoping to be touched by one of these snakes for they believed the touch had healing powers.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The touch of the snake was considered to be the touch of the god himself. For this reason Aesculapius was called the Preserver or the Savior. Christians felt this title of Savior for the snake god was a Satanic perversion of the truth. During the reign of Diocletian, some Christian stone cutters refused to carve the image of Aesculapius and were executed for their stand.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Pergamos was a royal city, the seat of the Roman government in the province of Asia in John's day. It had a royal library of 200,000 volumes on the shelves. This
was a huge amount considering every book was copied by hand. Mark Atony was so impressed with Pergamum's library that he sent it to his lover, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The use of parchment or the skins of animals as writing material was invented in the city of Pergamos. The word "parchment" is derived from the word Pergamos.
  - Pergamos was also the Paris of its day. It was the city of "style." A garment made and imported from Pergamos was guaranteed to be the latest in fashion.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The risen Lord emphasizes to the Christians of Pergamum, the official capital city of Asia, that he **has the sharp, double-edged sword.** In John’s vision of Jesus in chapter 1, the sword symbolized Jesus’ power to judge and conquer his enemies (see also Rev. 19:15).

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The Roman proconsul exercised the power of the sword from his judgment seat in Pergamum. He had the power of persecution, but not ultimate power. Only Christ is the ultimate wielder of power.
  - What if Christ’s enemies are found among those who profess his name but have actually turned astray to heresy? He will turn that same sword against them (v. 16).

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - This is the only letter in which Jesus begins “I know where you live” (2:13). It is the setting of the church, therefore, that creates its immediate problem.
  - Pergamum is the place “where Satan’s throne is”—i.e., “where Satan dwells” (2:13). Although an allusion to the temples of Zeus or Asclepius is possible here, it is much more likely that “Satan’s throne” is a reference to the emperor cult (if not to Pergamum’s status as the capital of the province, if that were still the case), given Pergamum’s preeminence in that regard.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - **The reference to Satan’s seat or throne may have been a reference to the gigantic temple of Zeus that was built on a high hill and whose altar towered 800 feet over the plain.** It was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. It was a huge court of columns shaped like a horseshoe, 120 feet by 112 feet. The altar of Zeus was 90 feet by 40 feet in size. He was referred to as Zeus the Savior which was offensive to the Christian.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - **Satan's throne may also have been a reference to Emperor worship which was very popular in Pergamos.** The city devoted three temples to pagan worship, one for Zeus and the other two being dedicated to the worship of two Roman emperors.
  - Emperor worship became a litmus test to determine who was loyal to Caesar and Rome. Failure to pinch incense to Caesar's image and declare him Lord and failure of the women in becoming temple prostitutes brought imprisonment or death.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Godly Christians would not compromise in these areas. This type of worship will be revived in the Tribulation as the world will worship the Antichrist.
This word *seat* means "a seat of special authority." Satan wielded special authority in Pergamos.

**Letter to Pergamos**

- What is important is that the environment in Pergamum is particularly hostile to Christianity. The result is pressure upon the Christians not to “hold fast to my name” but rather to “deny my faith” (i.e., faith in Jesus), which has already resulted in the martyrdom of a Christian named Antipas (2:13). “Faithful” is precisely the quality urged upon the church at Smyrna (2:10).

- Why Antipas was martyred is not known, but he is honored with the same title (“[my] faithful witness”) that was used previously of Jesus (1:5).
- That Jesus speaks of “the days of” Antipas suggests that the incident that led to Antipas’s martyrdom lay in the past; that he singles out by name one martyr suggests that widespread martyrdom is not yet an experience of the church at Pergamum, despite the fact that the church has not succumbed to the pressure to deny Jesus (2:13).


- The principle of the Christian life is not escape, but endurance and conquest by faith. It may be much easier to live somewhere else in easier circumstances, but our duty is generally to stay and become a testimony for the Lord and overcome the world in which we live.

- We should always remember that the grass usually looks greener somewhere else, but until we are with the Lord or in the millennium, life will be full of trials of some sort and to some degree. The call is for strength with all power, according to His glorious might, for attaining of all steadfastness and patience, joyously giving thanks… (cf. Col. 1:11–12a).

- The mention of the fact they had held fast to Christ’s name, and the death of Antipas would suggest persecution and attack by Satan to destroy this church. Since this was unsuccessful, Satan turned to other methods as we will see in what follows.


- “But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” (Revelation 2:14–15, ESV)

- The church at Pergamum remained loyal to Christ and Christian truth. It faithfully persevered at the very headquarters, as it were, of satanic opposition—even in the face of martyrdom. Yet all was not well at Pergamum. After commending the believers there, Christ informed them, I have a few things against you. His concern was that they had there some who hold to false teaching.
While the majority of the believers at Pergamum were faithful and loyal to the truth, there were some associated with the church who came to believe false doctrine.

While many in the Christian realm today make light of doctrine, and biblical and theological error are viewed as unimportant, that is not the perspective of the Lord of the church. Our Lord holds it against any in His church who hold to error.

Letter to Pergamos

The very word "Pergamos" has in it the same root from which we get our English words bigamy and polygamy. It is the word for marriage and elevation. The church at Pergamos became married to the world and was elevated into acceptance. Early in the fourth century, Christianity became married to the world and elevated into acceptance.

Letter to Pergamos

Two men contended for the throne of the Roman Empire after the death of Diocletian. Constantine from the West and Maxentius from the East went to battle. Tradition says that the night before the battle, Constantine saw a vision in the sky in the shape of a cross bearing the Latin words "in hoc signo vinces" which means "by this sign conquer." Constantine promised to declare himself a Christian if he won the battle and he did against overwhelming odds.

Letter to Pergamos

Maxentius had an army of 180,000 soldiers while Constantine had only 40,000 men. Constantine was not a Christian, but was most likely influenced by his parents, Constantius and Helena, who were said to be devoted believers in Jesus Christ.

Letter to Pergamos

On October 28, 312 A.D., Maxentius built a trap in the form of a bridge of boats that crossed the Tiber River. However, while standing there with a garrison of his troops, the bridge gave way, sending him and his elite guard to their deaths in the river. Within months of this victory, the Edict of Toleration was implemented in 313 A.D. and the persecution of Christians stopped.

Letter to Pergamos

Christianity was elevated and became the state religion. The persecuted Christians went from the catacombs to comfort.

The church became married to the world and people claimed to be Christians who had never been saved at all. There was no change at all in their life.

Letter to Pergamos

The emperor promised anyone who would convert to Christianity a white robe and twenty pieces of gold. In one year twelve thousand were baptized in Rome alone, most of them being unsaved.

Pagan practices were introduced into the church under the guise of Christianity because many of these heathens complained that they missed their pagan rites and festivals.

Letter to Pergamos

The Roman church decided to implement them in "so called" Christian worship in order to please the complaining masses.

- Prayers were made for the dead.
- The worship of saints and angels commenced.
- Mass was instituted.
• Mary was worshiped and eventually prayers were directed to her.
• Purgatory was introduced.
• The church became more Roman and less Christian. These teachings are not found in the Bible anywhere.
  o Mattoon's Treasures - Mattoon's Treasures – Treasures from Revelation.

• Letter to Pergamos
  • The reference to the Nicolaitans identifies the group who were teaching Balaamism. Note the words “thus…in the same way” of verse 15. As mentioned earlier, some think this refers to the followers of Nicolas (so say some of the church fathers), while others believe the word comes from nikaō, “to rule,” plus laos meaning “people.”

• Letter to Pergamos
  • Scholars are divided on the precise problem here, but it seems clear that they were subjugating the people to Satan’s authority by teaching compromise with the world which always neutralizes the church by compromise.
  • The church loses its pilgrim perspective and adopts the viewpoint, values, priorities, and pursuits of the world.
  • J. Hampton Keathley, III, Studies in Revelation (Galaxie Software, 2002), Re 2:15.

• Letter to Pergamos
  • The church at Pergamos also held to the doctrine of the Nicolaitaines which means "to rule the people." Their teaching involved the subjugation of the people and fulfilling the lusts of the flesh.
  • The word of priest's was considered more important than the Word of God. Their ultimate claim was infallibility. They could do no wrong.
  o Mattoon's Treasures - Mattoon's Treasures – Treasures from Revelation.

• Letter to Pergamos
  • Christians often reject the overt acts of what they think of as worldliness defined by a list of prohibitions or obligations both negative and positive, while retaining the viewpoint or attitude of worldliness. But worldliness is found more in attitudes and values than in acts because what we do is really the product of our thinking or belief system.

• Letter to Pergamos
  • Millions of people go through all the motions of worship each week but maintain a heart that is completely out of touch with God and end up, in reality, worshiping themselves.
  • We can meticulously avoid all overt acts of worldliness as we might define them, and still have a heart full of hypocrisy, criticism of others, jealousy, bitterness, envy, and preoccupation with the details of life rather than eternal treasures.

• Letter to Pergamos
  • There are many examples we might mention of worldliness, but one example that comes to mind is the Madison Avenue gimmickry which so often goes on in the name of evangelism or church growth.
  • J. Hampton Keathley, III, Studies in Revelation (Galaxie Software, 2002), Re 2:15.

• Letter to Pergamos
  • “Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.” (Revelation 2:16, ESV)
  • In verse 16, the Lord called this church to repentance with a sharp warning of judgment with the sword out of His mouth, suggesting that the judgment is based on the truth of His Word.
  • Remember, the sword symbolically represents the two-fold ability of the Word of God to separate believers from the world while at the same time to condemn the
world for its sin. It was the sword of salvation and deliverance as well as the sword of death.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Worldly thinking must be dealt with positively and quickly or it eats into our lives individually and corporately (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7–9). Like cancer, worldliness eats deeply into our viewpoint of life and what we expect from it. This impacts our values, and then our priorities and pursuits. And while we may begin to recognize much of its presence and seek to root it out, some of its remnants often remain below the surface, hidden like barnacles below the waterline on a ship.
    - J. Hampton Keathley, III, Studies in Revelation (Galaxie Software, 2002), Re 2:16.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The Lord counsels the church to repent. The verb “repent” is here an aorist imperative in the Greek text which carries with it an element of urgency. It calls for an immediate response, one designed to arrest the direction in which the church was going. “Repent” is metanoeō, “to change the mind.”

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Biblical repentance also involves changing one’s mind in a way that affects some change in the person. Repentance is not merely an intellectual assent to something; it also includes a resultant change, usually in actions.”
    - J. Hampton Keathley, III, Studies in Revelation (Galaxie Software, 2002), Re 2:16.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Among the **historicists** and some **futurists**, Pergamos is seen as representing the imperial church after Constantine (313–606), wherein the church ceased to be officially persecuted and obtained access to the portals of political power.
  - Pergamos, it is alleged, means “married to power.” It was during this time that the institution of the papacy had its inception. In 313, the Decree of Coronation made Rome (“where Satan’s throne is”) the center of Christendom.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Like Israel in the days of Balaam, the church of this period was being seduced into immorality and the worship of idols through the rise of the papal system.
  - Some who take this approach have suggested that Antipas does not refer to an individual, but to a class of men opposed (“anti-”) to the popes (“papas”), which men were martyred in great numbers in Rome and Constantinople.
  - Christ threatens to fight this institution with the sword out of His mouth—e.g., His Word.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’’ (Revelation 2:17, ESV)

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - “To him who overcomes…” Here is God’s challenge to believers to overcome by faith in the Savior’s victory and provision.
  - Specifically, overcoming in this context meant to refuse to eat of things sacrificed to idols and to remain sexually pure, to avoid fornication, and remain distinct and separate from the world.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - While initial faith that is genuine brings one into union with Christ, it is the continuation of an active faith from living in the Word, feeding on the things of
Christ, that overcomes and leads us into the abundance and sufficiency of Christ’s life with great reward both now and in the future.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Manna was God's miraculous provision for Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness. These little wafers of bread stood as a type or symbol of Jesus Christ and the Word of God. Jesus Himself said, "I am the bread of life." Christ is our provision for life. Only He can satisfy the longing of our heart. He is the one who gives strength.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - The promise of Jesus to overcomers was a **white stone**.
  - In Pergamos, the people used special corrrystals or stones with pagan symbols on them for healing and protection just as New Age worshipers do today. They believed their stones were good luck charms and kept them safe.
  - Because of this they could relate to the Lord's promise to give all believers their own special white stone. In ancient Greece and Rome, a white stone had significant meaning.
    - Mattoon's Treasures - Mattoon's Treasures – Treasures from Revelation

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - **The White Stone**
    - 1. In the Greek courts, the judges in a criminal trial gave their verdict by placing in an urn a **white or black stone**. If the verdict was "Not Guilty," a white stone was used. Jesus could have been saying that those who are believers in Christ have been acquitted and are found "Not Guilty" because of the atoning, cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.
    - 2. The white stone was also given to a slave that was set free. Those who are overcomers and born again have been set free from the bondage and penalty of sin.
    - 3. The white stone was also a badge of authority. It gave the bearer permission from the father or the master to do business in their name. In Christ, we have the authority of the Word of God to serve Him and spread His truth.
    - 4. White stones were also given to victors in the torch race in the Roman and Grecian games. The victor of the torch race was not only to finish first, but he was to finish with his torch lit. We are to keep our light shining for Christ. This reward of a white stone entitled the victor or his family access to the treasury any time. The white stone was a blank check. Jesus was saying to these overcomers, "In me you are victorious and I will supply your every need."
    - 5. Socially, the white stone was a stone of friendship and accorded the possessor the right of hospitality in the house of the man who offered it. It was a ticket of admission into the house, at the table and family circle of that friend. It was a carte blanche entitling the person who showed it to ask for and receive what he needed. It was a badge of friendship. Jesus was saying that the overcomer will have the right of admission to the house and table of the Lord. It is Christ's invitation to Heaven.
    - 6. In ancient times, a white stone was a symbol for a happy day. Pliny talks of a day "marked by the whitest of white stones." This stone was also an emblem of
a day of victory. Those in Christ will be welcomed as victors and will rejoice as they are reunited with loved ones and meet the Lord Jesus Christ face to face.

- **Letter to Pergamos**
  - Each believer will enjoy a special intimacy with the Lord which no other person will share. In the Bible, names that were given to an individual reflected the character or calling of that individual.
  - Based on the way you are living right now, what name would the Lord give to you? Would it be a name that meant faithful, loving, responsible, courageous, etc., or would it be a name that would mean the opposite of these traits? Take a good look at your life!