

# PERGAMUM, YOU'VE GOT MAIL

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## A TEMPTED CHURCH

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*Revelation 2:12-17*

At Ephesus we saw a church facing the challenges of a changing world. At Smyrna it was a poor church in a rich man's world. Now we travel another 40 miles or so north to the city of Pergamum, the modern Bergama. Pergamum was the regional capital of Asia Minor, which may be one reason this letter refers to the city as the throne of Satan. Evidently, the church in the city had experienced severe persecution, with at least one person, Antipas, giving his life for his faith. The church had stood firm in the face of this persecution but had difficulties in other areas. How true that often is! When faced with real difficulties the church rises up to meet the challenge. What caused the problems is the drip, drip, drip of daily life. This is what was happening in Pergamum.

This is just as true of our personal lives as our shared life. Give us a good crisis and we rise to the occasion. Our faith grows in the soil of bad news and unpleasant experiences. We testify how close God was when we went to the doctor to receive the results of feared tests. We say how we were comforted by God as we faced an unexpected or sudden bereavement. We tell of God's guidance when we face an awkward decision. But daily life grinds us down. It is the everyday troubles that spoil our walk with God. The mundane things we never tell others about. The monotony of life, the constant tiredness, the problems of encroaching age, the lack of meaningful relationships, the thanklessness of those around us. These are the things that have us down and threaten to overrun our faith.

In Pergamum it was not the knock of the door in the middle of the night, it was living in a city that offered so many enticing distractions. The letter refers to just two specifically, sacrificial food and sexual laxity, but others are hinted at. You will probably have noticed a reference to the Nicolaitans (2:15). These had been referred to in 2:6. No-one agrees who or what this refers to so I will add to the variety, if not the confusion, by giving you my idea. This will involve a short lesson on both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek. John, in recording these words of Jesus, links these Nicolaitans with Balaam, a character from the Old Testament. Balaam was an enemy of Israel who tried to seduce them away from God (Numbers 22-24). He did not succeed, but the interesting thing here is his name. 'Ba' al'am' is Hebrew for 'lord of the people' but it also may mean 'he has conquered or overcome the people' which is exactly the same meaning as the Greek word 'Niko-laon'. In other words, what we have here is a pun. What the Pergamum Christians are facing is not so much a particular religious heresy but a common experience of all God's people down through the years – seduction. God's people in the past experienced it, the Christians in Pergamum experienced it and now we experience it. We too face those everyday concerns that threatened to conquer, or overcome, the people. We struggle to live open, honest, Christian lives in a world that sees little or no point in such effort, enticing us in a thousand subtle ways to give in to the easy option.

The pun does not stop with Balaam and Nicolaus. 2:17 contains a play on the same word – ‘to those who overcome’. Do not be overcome, rather overcome, or as Paul puts it in Romans 12:2 ‘Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind’.

Jesus reminds his church that it is often these small things that mount up and overcome us. And the antidote – repentance. That is, a conscious turning away from even these small things that so easily trip us up and slow us down, and turning toward Jesus. For this is the thing about living a Christian life. It is not so much about the big things as the small, everyday things, that go to make up a life. Smyrna had discovered that, now it was Pergamum’s turn.

And the reward for this faithful living? Well it comes in two parts. Firstly, good food, The Pergamum Christians had been tempted by junk food (2:14) but Jesus offers real food. When a person cannot for one reason or another, find decent food they may be tempted to try junk food. Junk food is dangerous stuff. It seems quick and easy, it may even, in certain lights, look good, but ultimately it deceives. It may, as Eve discovered about the original junk food, be tasty, attractive and desirable, but it will lead to both short and long-term problems. So it is with those who have been brought up on spiritual junk food like hatred, fear, selfishness, sexual narcissism, self-indulgence, and the like. What is needed is a change of diet, and that food only Jesus can give – and will give to all who ask.

Secondly, a stone! Well, a white stone to be precise. Such a reward would seem like nothing to us these days, but to the Pergamum Christians, indeed to all who lived under Roman law, this white stone was significant. Roman judges, often indicated their verdict by placing a stone in front of them – black for guilty, white for innocent. By giving a white stone, Jesus is saying that the one he gives it to is innocent, that their repentance is acceptable, and that they need not fear judgement any more. To underline this, this white stone, which might be used to indicate the innocence of anyone, had a name carved permanently into its surface. This is not just a white stone that says someone is forgiven, it is *my* white stone that tells me I am forgiven. It is your stone, with your name. In fact, it is even more than that. Just to make sure that you and I are not confused or misled into thinking that this white stone really belongs to another it will have a new name on it – you will know that when Jesus says to you, ‘My friend, your sins are forgiven’ he means you, and you can always rely on that. Whenever the dark days come or even in the daily ups and downs of everyday life, and that little voice raises questions and doubts about whether Jesus really loves you, you have this promise, engraved as it were in stone, ‘I will never leave you, nor forsake you’. (Hebrews 13:5, from Joshua 1:5)

Amen

Sunday evening, 23 February 2020