

Lesson 4
Revelation 2:12 - 17

Christ and the Churches – Pergamum, the compromising church

Memory verse: “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” (Revelation 2:16)

Pergamum is less than a hundred miles from Ephesus. Smyrna would be about half way if you were moving north. Using Ephesus as the starting point, and then on to Smyrna, and then on about 50 miles, 55 miles or so north to the city of Pergamum. It's about 20 miles inland from the Aegean Sea.

On the ancient side of Pergamum there is a village today, it's called Bergama(?), it's a Turkish corruption of the word Pergamum. There is still, a small Christian community in Bergama. Legend says that Pergamum was built by a son of Hercules. Supposedly was built on a lofty hill in the broad and fertile plain of the Caicus valley by this son of Hercules. By the time John penned this letter, it had been the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor for somewhere between 250 and 300 years. The word "Pergamum" literally means parchment. Parchment is a writing material developed from animal skin. And apparently it was first developed in this area and thus the city of Pergamum took its name from that.

It was an important religious centre where the pagan cults worshipping Athena, Asklepios, Dionysius which is another name for Bacchus the god of drunkenness and debauchery, Zeus...all of these things were there. The worship of the Roman Emperor was very big. In fact, this was the first city in the ancient Roman world to build a temple to Caesar. The emperor worship had reached the point of cultic form. He was no longer seen as a political or military leader but he was seen as a god. And in this city they built the first temple to Caesar. Further years indicated that they built further temples, and so the city had perhaps several temples of worship for Caesar. It came then the capital of Caesar worship. Called “the greatest city in Asia Minor,” Pergamum was a rabid promoter of the imperial cult. This is probably what is meant by “Satan’s seat” in Revelation 2:13. The city also had a temple dedicated to Aesculapius, the god of healing, whose insignia was the entwined serpent on the staff. (This is still a medical symbol today.) Satan, of course, is likewise symbolized as the serpent (2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2).

What about the church? We move from the city to the church. How did it start? Well again we don't know. We do know, according to Acts chapter 16 that Paul passed through the area. This city, Pergamum, was in a region of Asia Minor called Mysia. And in Acts 16:8 it says Paul passed through there, whether in passing through there he effected some gospel ministry which brought some people to Christ in the city of Pergamum which was probably on the toll road, the Roman toll road through Mysia and Paul perhaps went through it, whether or not he had ministry there, we don't know. There's nothing in the book of Acts to tell us that he founded the church. The best understanding would come from Acts 19:10 because in Acts 19:10 you remember that the Apostle Paul had this wonderful ministry in the city of Ephesus and it was so powerful and so far-reaching that verse 10 says that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. So at some point during the time of three years ministering in Ephesus, the word was bouncing out. People were travelling and moving, Christians were going up north through these various cities and taking the gospel and it was echoing through all of Asia Minor.

During that period of time, no doubt, the church at Pergamum was founded. But it was in a very pagan atmosphere, completely perverse to Christian testimony. Pergamum obviously was a church made up of Gentiles primarily who had been converted out of paganism. They had, no doubt, been converted to Christ and there was some great transformation but times have changed and they have now gone back and picked up some of their pagan habits. They have married the world, as it were, and are in danger of the judgment of the Lord of the church. Disaster is looming on the horizon.

Things to learn: 1) Faith calls for loyalty and fidelity 2) Abuse of Christian freedom - undisciplined liberty and uninhibited licence. 3) Dangers of a compromising faith.

Discussion questions:

Q1 What are the commendations from the Lord for the church at Pergamum?

Q2 Why was Jesus' condemnation to the church at Pergamum so serious?

Q3 What are the implications of Jesus' warnings to the church at Pergamum (vv 16 – 17) and are these still relevant to Christians today?