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Revelation #5

### **God's People in Satan's City Revelation 2:12-17**

Ann and I lived in Kansas City, Missouri, known as "The City of Fountains." Before that, we lived in Chicago, "The Windy City". Paris, France, is called "The City of Lights" and New York is often described as "The City that Never Sleeps". We have friends who live in Las Vegas, infamously (but justifiably) referred to as "Sin City", and the list could go on.

So what's the point? Simply this: from what Jesus says in his letter to the church in Pergamum, the Christians there may well be described as living in "***Satan's City***"! "I know where you dwell," said Jesus, "where Satan's throne is" (Rev. 2:13a). Later in the same verse he refers to Pergamum as the place "where Satan dwells" (Rev. 2:13b).

Pergamum was one of the largest cities in the ancient world, with a population of @ 190,000. It was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia and retained this honor well into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. But it wasn't primarily for either political or economic achievements that Pergamum was famous, but for ***religion***. Pergamum was the center of worship for at least four of the most important pagan cults of the day.

Upon entering the city one couldn't help but notice the gigantic altar of ***Zeus*** erected on a huge platform some 800 ft. above the city, looking down on its inhabitants like a great vulture hovering over its prey. Many have sought to identify "Satan's seat" or "throne" (v. 13) with this altar. Amazingly, a reconstructed form of this altar is on display in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin (which I had the privilege [?] of visiting in 1994)!

Pergamum was also the center for the worship of ***Athene*** and ***Dionysus***. However, the most distinctive and celebrated cult of all was dedicated to the worship of ***Asclepios*** (or Aesculapius). Often referred to as "Savior" (*soter*) in Greek mythology, Asclepios was the son of Apollo and was thought to have been the very first physician. You may recall that the symbol adopted by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (renamed The Department of Health and Human Services in 1979) is the staff of Asclepios . . . with a serpent coiled around it!

But beyond the worship directed at these pagan deities was the fact that Pergamum was ***the acknowledged center in Asia Minor for the imperial cult of Caesar***. In 29 b.c. this city received permission to build and dedicate a temple to Augustus, three years before Smyrna was granted a similar privilege. Perhaps more than any of the other six cities, ***the people of Pergamum were devoted to the worship of Caesar***.

Were it not for the fact that “greater” is he who is in us “than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4b), it would be frightening to hear that Pergamum is “where Satan dwells” (Rev. 2:13b). Although this may simply be synonymous with “Satan’s throne” (v. 13a), it’s possible that this is another way of saying that *evil was present in Pergamum in a particularly powerful and concentrated way*. Could it be that Satan had in some sense made Pergamum the focus of his earthly base of operation?

*“I Know Where You Dwell”*

To those believers immersed in an explicitly Satanic atmosphere of idolatry and wickedness, Jesus says: “I know where you dwell!” To a people struggling by grace to remain faithful when those around them revel in faithlessness, Jesus says: “I know where you dwell!” To a church that must, at times, have felt abandoned and alone and given over to the enemy, Jesus says: “I know where you dwell!”

We have already seen that our Lord “knows” the churches, for he walks among them (Rev. 2:1). In this letter, however, Jesus declares that his knowledge extends not only to the works that Christians do (as in Ephesus) and to the suffering they endure (as in Smyrna) but to *the environment in which they live*. “I know where you dwell.” Jesus is fully aware of the pagan surroundings and pressures his people face.

The believers at Pergamum would often remind themselves that no matter how hard it was to be a Christian there, no matter how intense the temptation to abandon Christ and serve another “god”, Jesus knew where they lived, he knew what they faced on a daily basis, he knew every intimate detail of a life pursued in a city that hated God.

Jesus knows where you dwell! Whether you live in an isolated mid-western town of 5,000 or feel lost in a metropolis of 5,000,000, Jesus knows where you live! He knows the temptations you face, the pressures you feel, the fear that perhaps you’ve been misplaced or marginalized or lost in the shuffle of life and the countless concerns that our Lord must deal with on a daily basis. Fear not! Jesus knows where you dwell!

You haven’t been abandoned, far less ignored. Your life and ministry are as important to Jesus as that of any Christian in any church in any city in any country. You may feel as if our community is a modern Pergamum, devoted to idolatry and immorality and the public ridicule of our glorious savior. But of this you can rest assured: Jesus has *sovereignly* and *strategically* placed us here as his witnesses, to hold forth his name and to display his glory. That is why, contrary to what we read in v. 13, every city is Christ’s City!

The letter to the church at Pergamum consists of “the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword” (Rev. 2:12). When we hear or read of someone who has a “sharp two-edged sword” we typically envision it in his *hand*, to be wielded either in defense against an on-coming attack or used offensively to slay his enemies. But in the case of Jesus, the sword proceeds from his

*mouth!* Although the “mouth” of our Lord isn’t explicitly mentioned in Revelation 2:12, the description of him here is taken from the vision given to John in Revelation 1:16 where we read, “In his right hand he held seven stars, *from his mouth* came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength” (1:16; cf. 19:15, 21).

This is clearly figurative language, for not even the crassest literalist would argue that there is a literal sword proceeding out of the literal mouth of Jesus. But to say it is figurative is not in any way to diminish the very real point that the “words” of Jesus are an infinitely powerful force not only in the defense and building up of his people but also in the judgment and destruction of his enemies.

The reference to a “sword” in this passage (Rev. 2:12) carried special significance for the Christians in Pergamum, given the fact that the sword was the symbol of the Roman proconsul’s total sovereignty “over every area of life, especially to execute enemies of the state (called *ius gladii*), . . . This tells the church that it is the exalted Christ, not Roman officials, who is the true judge. The ultimate power belongs to God, and nothing the pagans can do will change that” (Osborne, 140).

The church in Pergamum was in desperate need of the power of Christ’s words. On the one hand, they were sorely tempted to abandon the faith. Death had already come to one of their number (see 2:13) and others no doubt faced a similar fate. Christ’s words were designed to strengthen their resolve and satisfy their souls lest they be drawn to another lover.

Whereas it is true that “the *whole world* lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19b), Pergamum was especially vulnerable to Satan’s influence. In some sense, as previously noted, this was *his* city. Pergamum was the center of his authority, the place of his throne, the focal point of his activity and interests. There must have been an almost tangible sense of his presence, a heaviness in the air, an oppressive spiritual atmosphere that was unmistakable and inescapable.

There have been times and places when I was keenly aware of an extraordinary spiritual darkness, all physical evidence to the contrary. In other words, a city, for example, can be outwardly prosperous, socially vibrant, and culturally sophisticated all the while an underlying demonic energy animates and defiles its life and ethos. We shouldn’t be surprised that our enemy might choose to concentrate his efforts in particular geographical areas or at unique and critical moments in history. It’s all part of his strategy to undermine Christian faith and promote the kingdom of darkness.

*Words of Commendation*

Our Lord's commendation of the Christians in Pergamum comes in two forms. He first applauds them for continuing to "**hold fast**" his "name", i.e., his identity as God incarnate and his redemptive work at Calvary, in spite of the presence of Satan's throne (Rev. 2:13a).

How often do we today, in public, speak in a hushed whisper when the name of Jesus is mentioned? What accounts for this? Could it be shame or embarrassment, or the prospect of "losing face"? I think it more likely that silence is driven by our *fear* of what might happen should those around us detect that we are Christians. It's remarkable, actually, given the fact that we face no persecution to speak of, no official resistance from our government. Yet, the Christians at Pergamum knew that a vocal public witness to the name of Jesus guaranteed precisely that, and worse.

I say *worse* because of what we read in the second half of verse 13. Not only were they *presently* holding forth a public testimony of the name of Jesus, in the *past* they had refused to deny their faith in spite of the martyrdom of an outspoken Christian named Antipas. Jesus commends them because they "did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells" (Rev. 2:13b).

An important point to note is that the believers in Pergamum held fast to their faith "**even** in the days of Antipas". The ESV translates it this way, rightly so in my opinion, to highlight the fact that there were life-threatening circumstances that might have made their silence a matter of prudence. Who could have blamed them, from a worldly perspective, that is, had they chosen to keep their mouths shut, or perhaps even deny Jesus altogether? But no, they didn't let the prospect of their own martyrdom close their mouths or diminish their commitment or mollify their zeal. What they are specifically said not to have denied is "the faith of me." This odd phrase should probably be rendered "faith *in* me", pointing to their unyielding and sturdy confidence in Jesus and the truth of his gospel.

### *Words of Complaint*

However, as noted earlier, there was something wrong in Pergamum. Notwithstanding their remarkable devotion to the Lord, they had become overly tolerant of others whose immorality threatened to undermine the purity of the church. ***If the Ephesian church was guilty of elevating truth above love, the church at Pergamum had elevated love above truth.*** Their commitment to peace and tolerance had apparently degenerated into a weak sentimentality that now posed both a serious ethical and theological threat.

Whereas they had maintained their own theological convictions they were, at the same time, tolerating in their fellowship certain false prophets who advocated licentious behavior, ostensibly in the name of Christian freedom (see vv. 14-15). Although they had not themselves denied the faith, they had become inexplicably lax toward falsehood in the assembly and had endured the presence and teaching of ethical error. For this, Jesus severely rebukes them.

This is a truly remarkable, indeed puzzling, situation. They were devoted to the truth of who Christ is and the essentials of the gospel message. They were even willing to die for it! But they fudged when it came to dealing with those in the church who compromised the ethical implications of that very gospel. It's almost as if they said, "I personally will never back down, even if it means my death. On the other hand, perhaps we need to be less rigid and a bit more tolerant when it comes to those who draw different conclusions about the practical implications of the saving grace of our Lord."

"NO!" said Jesus. This is horribly inconsistent and must be immediately and firmly addressed (v. 16). There's nothing to indicate why they had adopted this posture. It certainly wasn't out of fear. Perhaps they reckoned that such ethical and theological deviations were of little consequence or that they could more easily win over the dissidents by declining to rock the ecclesiological boat. Whatever the case, they were misguided in granting them such a wide berth, and must act swiftly to put things right. The bottom line is this: *sometimes peace and love come at too high a price!*

Although grace is surely amazing, it is also subject to distortion, especially by those who use it to excuse loose and licentious behavior (see Galatians 5:13; Jude 4). The justification comes in a variety of forms:

"If all my sins have been forgiven, they are now of little consequence."

"If I can't be saved by works, I need not be concerned with their absence in my life."

"If Jesus has set me free, I'm obligated to no law or leader."

"Because I'm free in Christ, I can participate in the idolatrous culture of my city without fear of contamination."

According to Revelation 2:6, the Ephesians "hated" the work of the Nicolaitans and refused to tolerate their pernicious behavior. The Pergamemes, on the other hand, had welcomed them into the fellowship of the church and given them freedom to propagate their destructive ways. There's no indication these false teachers had openly denied the "name" to which the others at Pergamum held fast. In other words, I doubt if the error of the Nicolaitans was a denial of the Incarnation of Christ, his propitiatory work on the cross, or his bodily resurrection. Rather, as noted above, they were guilty of turning the grace of God into licentiousness.

Jesus describes them as holding to "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" (Rev. 2:14-15).

We read of Balaam in Numbers 22-24. Balak, King of Moab, had solicited Balaam to curse the children of Israel who were preparing to cross over into the promised land. But God intervened. Every time Balaam spoke, words of blessing came forth. Moved by greed for the reward Balak offered him, Balaam advised Balak that Moabite women should seduce the men of Israel by inviting them to partake in their idolatrous feasts (which invariably led to sexual immorality).

Balaam knew that this would provoke the judgment of God against his people (which is precisely what happened).

What Balaam was to the children of Israel in the Old Testament, the Nicolaitans were to the church of Jesus Christ in the New. Balaam is a prototype of those who promote compromise with the world in idolatry and immorality (see also Jude 11 and 2 Peter 2:15). ***The Nicolaitans had dared to insinuate that freedom in Christ granted them a blank check to sin.*** The fault of the Pergamemes was not so much that they had followed this pernicious teaching but that they had allowed it be vocalized in the congregation. This matter of indifference to the licentiousness of the Nicolaitans was of grave concern to the risen Lord.

What is the precise nature of their sin? They put a stumbling block in the way of God's people "so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality" (v. 14). The former probably refers to eating food sacrificed to idols *in the context of idolatrous worship*. Perhaps, then, the Nicolaitans were advocating, in the name of Christian freedom, participation in the worship service both of the local church and the local pagan temple (see 1 Cor. 10:14-22).

And what of the reference to the practice of "sexual immorality"? Often in the Old Testament spiritual idolatry was described metaphorically in terms of prostitution and sexual immorality (see Jer. 3:2; 13:27; Ezek. 16:15-58; 23:1-49; 43:7; Hosea 5:4; 6:10). In Revelation, to "fornicate" (*porneuo*) and its cognates usually are metaphorical for spiritual apostasy and idol worship (14:8; 17:1,2,4,5,15,16; 18:3,9; 19:2). When these words are used literally, they are part of vice lists (9:21; 21:8; 22:15).

However, we can't dismiss the possibility that the Nicolaitans were teaching that forgiveness of sin and their new found freedom in Christ have now released them from what they regarded as "slavish obedience" to rules and regulations concerning sexual conduct. How tragic that today we still hear such arguments in the defense of both heterosexual and homosexual immorality.

But why not just "live and let live"? Is it really necessary that the faithful in Pergamum confront these libertines? Why rock the boat? Doesn't Christian "love" call for tolerance and "minding our own business"? I'll let the words of Jesus answer those questions: "Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth" (Rev. 2:16).

Two things deserve comment. First, the repentance Jesus calls for entails immediate acknowledgment of the error in their thinking and the lack of courage in their stance regarding the antinomians. "Recognize and confess," says Jesus, "that you are doing no one a favor by overlooking and allowing such sin in your midst! Confronting the Nicolaitans may be uncomfortable for you, even painful, but not nearly as painful as the judgment they will suffer if they remain in their sin!"

Second, notice that Jesus says "I will come to ***you***" soon, but will "war against ***them***". The faithful at Pergamum aren't off the hook. If they don't repent Jesus will bring discipline against

them (in precisely what form we aren't told). But the Nicolaitans will be the focus of judgment. It is against "them" that Jesus will make "war". Such language suggests that their lack of repentance would be evidence of a lack of saving faith. Their persistent licentiousness and morally compromising behavior undermines their claim to know Jesus in a saving way.

### *Words of Promise*

There's no way around the fact that "peace" and "harmony" may suffer when we are committed to living out the ethical implications of the gospel of grace. But it's a price we must be willing to pay. In the immediate present there will be some attendant pain when hard decisions are made and morally compromising behavior is confronted. But look at what Jesus promises in the long run for those who are obedient, i.e., for those who "conquer" (Rev. 2:17) by repenting from such "sloppy agape" and refuse to participate with or permit the teaching of the Nicolaitans. They will receive "**some of the hidden manna**" (Rev. 2:17), as well as "**a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it**" (Rev. 2:17).

Hebrew tradition records that a pot of manna was preserved in the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 16:32-34; Hebrews 9:4). According to 2 Maccabees 2.4-7, when the temple was destroyed in 586 b.c., either Jeremiah or an angel supposedly rescued the ark, together with the manna, both of which would be preserved underground on Mt. Sinai until the messianic age, when the manna would again become the food for God's people. When the Messiah would come, Jeremiah would reappear and deposit both ark and manna in the new temple in Jerusalem.

But ***the manna, most assuredly, is Jesus himself*** (John 6:48-51). The promise to those who "conquer" in Revelation 2:17, therefore, is the assurance that *they will feast forever on the person of Christ!* That's a wonderful thought, a moving metaphor, but what does it *mean*?

It means that Jesus, and only Jesus, will be the sustenance of our body and soul for all eternity. On him alone shall we spiritually feed and draw strength. He is the source of our on-going and eternal life. We are forever dependent on the infusion of his grace and mercy, upheld in existence by the exertion of his marvelous power.

It means we will experience, in relation with him, depths of intimacy utterly inconceivable in our present state of being. Our fallen minds cannot conceive the dimensions of spiritual ecstasy that await us in the ages to come. Our deceitful hearts cannot fathom the spiritual joy we'll feel forever as the magnitude of his affection for us is made known afresh each moment of each passing day.

It means that when it comes to our knowledge of his personality and the glory and wisdom of his ways, words such as "consummation" and "termination" and "completion" will be utterly out of place. The revelation of his character will be eternally incessant. The display of heretofore unknown facets of his beauty will suffer no lack.

It means that we will never grow weary of seeing his splendor or become bored with the disclosure of his grace. Jesus, as the manna of eternal life, will be an infinite supply of refreshment and joy and affirmation and delight. It means that just as eating now brings a physical satisfaction, as hunger pains are silenced and cravings are met, so the “bread of life” will satisfy our souls and enrich our resurrected bodies and fascinate our glorified minds beyond our wildest and most outrageous dreams!

It means that Jesus will be for us an endless, self-replenishing spring of refreshing water, an inexhaustible, infinitely abundant source of excitement and intrigue, an eternal, ever-increasing database of knowledge and insight and discovery that will never diminish in its capacity to enthrall and captivate. It means that because of Jesus, and Jesus alone, we will experience the odd but glorious sensation of never being deficient but always desiring increase, of ever being filled but constantly hungry for more.

Some argue that the “white stone” (2:17) signified acquittal by a jury, as over against a black stone that pointed to the guilt of the defendant. If that is the background to our text, Jesus would be highlighting the reality of our forgiveness. What a blessed image indeed, that God the Father pronounces us not guilty by virtue of the redemptive work of his Son, our Savior.

Others point to the practice of certain pagan religions in which people would carry an amulet or stone with the name of their deity inscribed upon it. It supposedly was used as a source of magical power. If this is the background to our Lord’s reference, the name would be that of God or of Christ (see Rev. 3:12; 14:1; 19:12). “To know the name of a deity was to possess a claim upon his help: here the power of Christ to save and protect is exalted over that of his pagan rivals” (Hemer, 99).

White stones were often used as *tokens of membership or tickets for admission* to public festivals. If this is the background for the text, the white stone *may* be a symbol for the believer’s admission to the messianic feast of Revelation 19. It is “white” in order to portray the righteousness of those who are granted entrance. As we read in Revelation 19:8, it was granted to the Bride, i.e., the Church, “to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”

I must confess that I’m even more intrigued by the “new name” written on the stone “that no one knows except the one who receives it” (Rev. 2:17). This is clearly an allusion to the prophecy in Isaiah 62:2 (“The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and **you shall be called by a new name** that the mouth of the Lord will give”) and 65:15 (“but his [God’s] servants he will call by **another name**”). In both cases these concern Israel’s future kingly status and restoration to Yahweh, but are here applied to individuals within the *Church*, she who is the true Israel of God.

Another question is whether this new name given to the overcomer is Christ’s or the individual’s. I’m inclined to think the “new name” in v. 17 is one given uniquely to each individual believer

and that it points to the fact that in Christ we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). We have a new identity in him. All things about us are made new in Christ and our sinful past is a long-forgotten memory.

This isn't to say that the old or original name, given to us by our parents or the world, is evil or to be casually discarded. Rather, one's name, at least in biblical times, typically signified or pointed to one's character or calling or function. In other words, a person's name was more than simply a label to differentiate them from others. You didn't simply have a name: a person *was* his name. Name ideally reflected nature.

All this to say that God will re-name each of us in accordance with the transformation of our nature into the likeness of his Son, to reflect the new and altogether unique identity each has received by grace and the irrevocable destiny we have in Christ. My new name, like yours, will reflect the character of the new creation in which I am a participant, as over against the old or original creation corrupted by sin and death. My new name, like yours, will be suitable to the new heavens and new earth in which I'll dwell, a place devoid of evil and error.

But there is more to this "new name" than merely its newness. It is a name that "*no one knows*" except for the individual "who receives it." Might this point to the *intimate, intensely personal* nature of one's life in God? Could it be that Jesus is highlighting the depths of intimacy and acceptance that each of us enjoys (and especially *will* enjoy) in the secret recesses of our souls? Yes, I think so.

In this regard we must also remember that the "manna" given to us is described as "*hidden*" (Rev. 2:17a). Some believe this is simply a reference to its having been "hidden" in a jar in the Ark of the Covenant, but I think something more is involved. If Jesus is himself the manna, perhaps the point is that all that awaits us in him is "hidden" in the sense that it is reserved and kept safe and guarded against all possibility of loss so that we might revel in its certainty and the assurance that what God has promised, he will indeed provide.

To sum up, there is an *identity* you have in God, reflected in your new name, that transcends whatever shame or regret or disappointment is wrapped up in who you are now. There is a very private and personal *place of intimacy with him* that brings hope and freedom and joy that none can touch or taint or steal away. Paul said it best when he declared that "your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3b). Peter echoed much the same thing in saying that we have "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven" for us (1 Peter 1:4).