

# PERGAMOS AND FALSE DOCTRINE

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Revelation 2:12-17 contains Christ's letter to the church at Pergamos. Pergamos was a prominent city in the Roman Province of Asia Minor during the First Century A.D., when Revelation was written. It was located on a hill on the north side of the Caicus River, 16 miles from the Aegean Sea in modern day western Turkey. Typical of its time, it was an idolatrous city, and the reconstructed Great Altar of Pergamon is today located in a museum in Berlin, Germany. Jesus referred to the city as "where Satan dwells," and the location of "Satan's throne" (Rev 2:13), possibly a reference to the massive altar. The letter to the church there teaches us a great lesson about the seriousness of false doctrine.

## **The doctrine of Balaam**

Christ commended the church for holding fast his name and not denying the faith (Rev 2:13), not a small thing for these people who lived in Satan's dwelling place. In Pergamos, refusing to deny the faith had cost Antipas his life. But as well as these brethren had done in being willing to risk their lives to hold fast to Christ's name, everything was not well with the church at Pergamos. The Lord rebuked them for having the false doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans among them (Rev 2:14-15). Balaam tried three times to curse the children of Israel for the sake of Balak the king of Moab, but God turned it into a blessing three times (Num 22-24). Balaam wanted Israel cursed in order to gain a great material reward from Balak (Num 22:7; Neh 13:2; 2 Pet 2:15). Since he was unable to accomplish this with his own words, we learn in Revelation 2:14 that Balaam came up with another way to curse Israel. God had said in the law of Moses that he would curse Israel for committing idolatry or fornication (Deut 11:26-28; 27:15; 20-23,26). Therefore, Balaam taught Balak to put a stumbling block before Israel by enticing them to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication. This effort was successful and God did curse Israel and brought a plague upon them which killed 24,000 (Num 25:1-9). In the New Testament, fornication (1 Cor 6:9,13-18; 1 Thes 4:3) and idolatry (1 Cor 10:14; 1 Thes 1:9; 1 John 5:21) are still forbidden. In the context of Revelation 2:14, the church at Pergamos apparently had among them false teachers who were leading them into idolatry and fornication. These teachers may have been trying to compromise with the idolatrous and immoral practices of their worldly neighbors in order to avoid persecution. They may have simply been taking pleasure in

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unrighteousness (Rom 1:32; 2 Thes 2:12). Regardless of their motive, they were unquestionably wicked.

## **The doctrine of the Nicolaitans**

Revelation 2:15 says that some in the church at Pergamos also held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Jesus hated their doctrine (Rev 2:15) and also their deeds (Rev 2:6). The Nicolaitans were widespread in Asia Minor at this time as we read of their presence in both Ephesus and Pergamos. We do not know exactly what the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was. Some have tried to construe what the doctrine was from the name “Nicolaitans,” but this is likely a futile effort since it appears to be named for someone named Nicolas. There are no details available from the writings of contemporary historians to shed any further light on this sect. The bottom line is we just do not know for certain what the doctrine was. But that does not really matter. The point is, the Lord *hates* false doctrine no matter what it is. We also should hate every false way (Ps 119:104,128).

## **A little leaven**

The letter to the church at Pergamos strongly emphasizes the seriousness of false doctrine. False doctrine is a threat to the very identity of the Lord’s church. A little of this leaven will leaven the whole lump (1 Cor 5:6-7; Gal 5:9). This type of “evil communication” will corrupt (1 Cor 15:33). False doctrine eats like gangrene and overthrows faith (2 Tim 2:16-18). For this reason, it cannot be tolerated, not even for an hour (Gal 2:5). False teachers must be marked and avoided (Rom 16:17), withdrawn from (1 Tim 6:3-5), and rejected (Titus 3:10-11). Pergamos was tolerating error. In verse 16, the Lord told them to “repent or else.” Jesus introduced himself in the letter as “he which has the sharp sword with two edges” (Rev 2:12), and then warned them that he would come unto them quickly and fight against them with the sword of his mouth if they did not repent (Rev 2:16). This illustrates the power that Christ has and will use to take vengeance on evildoers (2 Thes 2:7-10; Rev 19:15), including those who teach, follow, or tolerate doctrinal error. The sobering lesson in this letter to the church at Pergamos is that even being willing to die for the faith is not sufficient to receive the crown of life if we are allowing that faith to be corrupted by false doctrine. It is not good enough to overcome some temptations and fall to others (Jas 2:10). We need to overcome them all!