

(Video)

Eumenes, the king of Pergamum, and Ptolemy, the king of Egypt, were involved in warfare. Now this was not military warfare as such. But it was warfare nonetheless. We might call it book warfare. You see, both of these kings were very proud of their libraries. Pergamum had one of the most famous libraries in the ancient world, numbering more than 200,000 books. The greatest library in the ancient world, of course, was in Alexandria, in Egypt. Eumenes looked with envious eyes at the librarian of that library in Alexandria, Aristophanes of Byzantium. The jealousy of Eumenes caused him to try something that was unheard of in those days. Eumenes approached Aristophanes and tried to recruit him to leave his position in Alexandria and come to assume the position of librarian in Pergamum. Well, needless to say, Ptolemy was incensed. So infuriated was he that an attempt would be made to seduce so great a scholar from his empire that he took drastic action in 2 steps. First of all, he locked up Aristophanes in prison, thereby making it impossible for him to even consider yielding to the offer of Eumenes. And then, he banned the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Well, now it appeared that Eumenes' vision had taken a fatal turn for the worse. Not only had he lost his prime recruit, but now he had also lost the major source of writing material, papyrus. This would stunt the growth of the library in Pergamum forever. But just as the night appeared to be the darkest, as so often happens, a great blessing emerged. The ban of papyrus made it necessary for Eumenes to commission research on new forms of writing materials, and out of this research came a new substance. It would be named Pergamum Charta, later shortened to Parchment, writing materials made from the skins of animals, far more durable than papyrus. And the books of the New Testament and other sacred writings would be written on Parchment, many copies of these early manuscripts even being preserved to this day.

The cold war between Eumenes and Ptolemy illustrates the great history and tradition of this city of Pergamum. It was a city with a great heritage, and it was proud of its reputation for scholarship and culture. John included the church in this city as one of the recipients of the Revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ and it was to this city that John addressed his third message.

As with each of these messages to the churches, we see that this one falls into several major sections being basically outlined by the Apostle John himself. First of all, he gives a **commendation** to the church. This is what you are doing well. Then John presents a **complaint** against them. This is an area that needs improvement. And then finally, he **concludes** with a reward for those who would heed his message.

1. Let's first of all look at the commendation together. This church was in a very difficult environment. They lived where the throne of Satan himself was. Yet in the midst of this hostile environment, they had maintained and held the truth of God, and God was very pleased with that.

The fact that Pergamum is called the place where Satan has his throne has, of course, engendered a great deal of commentary and our video referred to some of these views. The video presented the 3 major views – the altar to Zeus, the healing temple of Asklepios and the Caesar worship at the monument to Trajan leaning towards the later being the interpretation of choice. I'm going to differ just a bit from the emphasis of our video this morning. I wanted you to see it so that you could view the ancient ruins for yourselves, but I put more stock in the worship of Asklepios in Pergamum with regards to this reference to Satan's throne than our video does and I want to give you some reasons for this.

Asklepios was the god of healing in the ancient world, and he was one of the central gods that the people in Pergamum worshipped. You saw the ruins of the magnificent temple in honor of Asklepios. His official title was Asklepios Soter, Asklepios our Savior. That fact alone indicated that Asklepios was vying for the title that belonged only to Jesus Christ, for he alone was the Savior of the world. But there was even something that was more suggestive than that about the worship of Asklepios. The form that he was worshipped in was the form of a serpent. Now one does not have to even be a serious student of the Scriptures to realize the significance of the serpent in the Bible as a symbol of Satan. The enemy used the form of a serpent in the original temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden, and since that time, Satan is called the serpent throughout the Scriptures. In fact, several times in this very book, John would identify the devil or Satan as the serpent.

The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient **serpent** called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (Rev. 12:9)

And later –

He seized the dragon, that ancient **serpent**, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. (Rev. 20:2)

Just to name a couple.

So it would be natural for John to identify the serpent with Satan's throne earlier in the book since he was going to connect them later as well. And Asklepios was worshipped in the form of a serpent.

Asklepios, the serpent, claimed to be the healer. Pilgrims from all over would go thru a tunnel, and would allow snakes that had been somewhat tamed to crawl over their bodies thinking that they would bring healing power with them from the god of healing, Asklepios. In fact, to this day, if you notice the symbol of modern medicine, you will often see a snake wound around a pole. This goes back directly to Asklepios, the ancient god of healing, the one many years ago who was so identified with this city of Pergamum that he was often called the Pergamene God. And so it is very possible that this city is called the place where Satan dwelt because of the ancient worship of Asklepios, the god of healing.

Now to the credit of these Christians in Pergamum who had been living in this pagan environment, they had been true to the truth of God's word. John says speaking on behalf of the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword, Jesus Christ himself, "yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me."

God is very concerned that his truth be preserved, and he is pleased when his people sacrifice so that his truth might be passed on to future generations. In fact, one man known only by his name Antipas of whom we know nothing except for his name in this letter, had died as a witness, choosing death rather than denial of the truth of God. It is interesting that this is the third characteristic that John gives of these churches of Jesus Christ. You remember that the first one was love, the love of the Ephesian church. The second one was persecution, the suffering of the Smyrnan church. Now the third is the preservation of the truth, doctrinal purity. If both love and truth are to be held in proper balance, then a measure of persecution and suffering is inevitable. Christ does not desire that his truth be watered down. Biblically Christianity is that which manifests both love and a tenacious grasping of the truth of God. Its love is the love of God's truth, and its truth is proclaimed in love.

Now we could say that every church of every age was built in the place where Satan has its throne, because this world and its system is the tool of Satan in this day. Satan is called the 'god of this age' and the 'prince of power of the air' in the Bible. Therefore, it is not just the church at Pergamum, but it is every church that will have a struggle maintaining the truth of God because that truth runs directly contrary to the major messages found in the world system. While the world might speak of Biblical values like love and truth, a careful examination shows that the definitions of the terms used are nothing like the Biblical ones. And it is the Christian who cares enough about God and His program to carefully search out the Scriptures, and stand unashamedly for His truth that will be the one who is commended by God. What a blessing it will be to hear those words from Christ "you remained true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me."

2. But while the church as a whole had remained true to their faith in Christ and was to be commended for it, there were some who were compromising God's truth, and John had a complaint against them.

READ Rev. 2:14-16.

REV 2:14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Now you will recall Balaam from the O.T. He was an obscure yet fascinating prophet of God found in Numbers 22-24. He is somewhat unique in that he was not a part of the nation of Israel, yet he was clearly a prophet to whom the word of God came, and for all of his faults, he was true to God's word in delivering it to the people of Moab.

Now might remember that story from Numbers. I wish that we had time to go back and study these 3 chapters together, but we don't, so let me just refresh your memory briefly.

The Israelites were in the midst of their travels thru the wilderness, waiting for the time when they would again have the opportunity to enter the Promised Land. In the midst of their journeys, they were

crossing by the plains of Moab. Now the Moabites, and especially their king Balak, were concerned about the Israelites because of the military threat that they posed. Yet at the same time, Balak and his countrymen respected the Israelites because they recognized that God had been with them and prospered them. So Balak got this idea. He summoned Balaam who was recognized as a prophet, and he tried to bribe him into pronouncing a curse on the Israelites. The implication was that if Balaam would pronounce a curse on them, then Balak and his Moabites would feel free to attack them and annihilate the Israelites from off of the face of the earth.

Balaam the prophet was pleased with this assignment because he knew that it might represent great financial gain for him. So even though he knew that the Israelites were God's people, Balaam tried to approach God 3 times to draw out of him a curse against his people. God was very displeased with Balaam's persistence and gave to him 3 blessings instead. To Balaam's credit, he did not try to change the word of God, but gave to King Balak the blessings instead of curses, and he even incurred the wrath of Balak who said to him, "I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these 3 times. Now leave at once and go home. I said I would reward you handsomely, but the Lord has kept you from being rewarded." Num. 24:10-11. And Balaam answered, "Did I not tell the messengers that you sent me, Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad, to go beyond the command of the Lord- and I must say what the Lord says." Num. 24:12,13. And then Balaam even pronounced a curse against Moab before he left. Now as we leave the book of Numbers, we are very impressed with this prophet Balaam. Even though we recognize that he was somewhat greedy and that he attempted to perform a duty that would have been damaging to the nation of Israel, we admire his integrity as a prophet of God and his commitment to speak only what God had commanded for him. But we don't know the whole story yet, for 2 N.T. passages (2 Peter 2:15 and Jude 11) along with this one in Rev. bring out additional insights.

Evidently after Balaam left Balak, his greed began to overcome his integrity. And his lust for material prosperity caused him to come up with a devious scheme against the Israelites. We can't attack them from

without for God is protecting them, so we will do the next best thing. We will attack them from within. So Balaam evidently returned to Balak, claiming to have a plan that would weaken the Israelites and he offered to act as Balak's adviser probably for a fee. Balak, who secretly must have respected Balaam's integrity, was only too happy to purchase Balaam's help. So Balaam presented this plan that he had hatched, a plan that would prove to be very effective. First of all, the most beautiful of the Moabite women were to go into the Israeli camp and invite the Jewish men to parties and other social gatherings. Then those Moabite women were to seduce the Jewish men into immoral relationships inviting them to take part in their idolatrous and immoral feasts. Balaam knew that when the Israelites succumbed to these sins, God's anger would be provoked, and then they would have no trouble getting a curse from God concerning the Israelites. And that is exactly what happened. The Moabites tempted the Israelites into sin under the guise of friendship, and the Israelites had to suffer the consequences of their sin which greatly weakened the nation. Numbers 25 gives an account of this Moabite temptation and its consequences.

Now let me say that this methodology of Satan has proved to be his most effective tool throughout the history of the church. Direct, outward attacks on the church are fruitless, because Jesus Christ said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The church is protected by almighty God himself- Satan has no power to conquer it in direct assault.

But Satan has found indirect ways to weaken the church from the inside. He comes to it thru those who are his followers, who are steeped in his system. He comes to the chosen people of God thru those who reach out hands of friendship saying, "come on, loosen up a little bit in those righteous standards, and join us. We'll have great times of fun and pleasure." And when sin and unrighteousness begin to permeate the life of the Christian, the power of God is stymied. And one day, the Christian as Samson of old, wakes up and says, "Where did the power of the Holy Spirit go in my life?" It left because it was crowded out by the affections for the world. John wrote in his first epistle "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the father is not in him." I John 2:15.

You see, love for the world and love for the Lord cannot coexist in a person. Love for the Lord will

make the greatest attractions of the world pale in comparison, and love for the world will drive out love for the Lord.

Now most of the Christians in the church at Pergamum had been faithful to God's truth- they were standing for him even to death. But there were some who were compromising that truth. They were reasoning that they could somehow combine those immoral religious practices with their Christian principles, and have the best of both worlds. But what they did not count on was the fact that although the sin was pleasant for a short time, the end was the stinging bite of that serpent Asklepios. And just like Samson who had the world by the tale at one time in his life, the ability to defeat armies of men singlehandedly, they were going to end up blinded by sin and laboring under the cruel taskmaster, Satan.

So it is with many Christians today. We can have our faith and all of the hedonistic values of the world too, they claim. And so they join the world in its obsession with sexual freedom, unbridled lust for wealth, power and ambition- and one day they stop and ask themselves, where did the joy and the power of the Spirit go in my life?

3. John promises to the one who overcomes, the one who remains faithful to the Lord, that he will be given 2 precious articles. First of all, he will be given hidden manna. This obviously refers to some of the manna that was preserved in a bowl in the ark of God. You will recall that although the manna came every morning, 6 days a week, while the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, it also quickly melted away with the heat of the sun during the day. If anyone attempted to hoard some of it, it rotted and became putrefied. But there was a little bit that was preserved and put in the Ark of the Covenant for a lasting reminder of God's provision. The manna was a picture of Jesus Christ himself. And the one who overcomes the subtleties of Satan's attack will be given a relationship with Jesus Christ which surpasses anything that this world has to offer.

The second treasure is a white stone. Now there have been many attempts to define this white stone, and we cannot be dogmatic as to its symbolism. I have 5 of the major interpretations right here before me, but we don't have time to dwell on them: White stones were used for counters in calculations (faithful men

will be reckoned among God's people); symbols of a happy day (Pliny); tickets for admission and free food to circuses, gladiatorial games and other entertainments; amulets worn for good luck to keep a person safe.

But let me give to you one possibility that certainly would apply in keeping with the overall context of Scriptures. In the ancient times, juries voted by casting a stone into an urn. Now I was called into jury duty recently and was not chosen for a jury. But several decades ago, I was the foreman on a jury that judged an attempted rape case. After we had heard all the evidence and deliberated until we were all in agreement, we walked back into the courtroom and I had to stand up and give the verdict of the jury to the judge. In John's day, while they had somewhat of a similar method of hearing evidence, they had a different manner of delivering the verdict. Each juror was given 2 stones, a black one and a white one. As each juror would come back into the courtroom after their deliberation was over, the juror would place his stone into a jar- the white stone stood for acquittal, the black stone stood for condemnation. Then the judge would count up the stones. If the majority were white, the prisoner was freed to go. If the majority were black, the prisoner was sentenced.

The one who is faithful to God here during this life and who overcomes the assaults of the enemy is going to know a relationship with the living Christ that surpasses anything that this world has to offer. And then he is also going to stand before his maker and judge one day to hear the words well done my good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord.