

Balaam - Revelation #9

Revelation 2:12

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

The One who has the sharp two edged sword says this:

This is another message to the Church given by Jesus Christ.

The attribute of Christ given to this church in the city of Pergamum is drawn from verse 16 of Chapter 1.

Revelation 1:16

...and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword...

When we studied this characteristic of Christ we noted that this two-edged sword is not the normal Roman sword. The gladius, which is the origin of the word gladiator, was a short sword used for close quarters combat. This sword is a romphia. It was a long sword, intended to be used with both hands.

It originated in Thrace. That is just north of Greece and is where Alexander the Great was born. When the Romans encountered the romphia, it was so powerful that it caused the Romans to change the design of their helmets, as it necessitated more reinforcing. It is the only known weapon that caused the Romans to change their armor.

So the romphia is the most powerful sword known at that time. But the sword is not in the hands of Jesus, it is coming out of His mouth. This sword is the word of God. The point of Biblical references to a sword is that it is sharp and penetrates. This is why I preach the way I do. My words have no power. Only the word of God has power and my job is simply to present it to the best of my ability. Lay it out as faithfully as I know how, and then let the Holy Spirit use it to transform hearts.

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

That is what Jesus is coming to do. Jesus came the first time as the Lamb of God. Next time as the Lion of Judah. He is coming to judge the world and put an end to Satan's dominion over the Earth. All those who follow Satan will be judged. But this job belongs to Christ and Christ alone. Only He is *able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*.

Now the world will gladly take up that mantra and say that we cannot judge them. And they are exactly correct. I cannot judge them about anything that they choose to do. But I can, indeed it is my responsibility to tell them, about the judgment that God has already rendered. I can speak with authority about absolutes and what is morally right or wrong because I have the owner's manual telling me how things are supposed to work.

So if they don't like it when I say that what they are doing is wrong, their argument is not with me, it is with God. If you don't like what He has said, you have to take that up with Him. And may I further add, I can predict with confidence the outcome of that conversation.

Revelation 2:13

I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

Christ begins with acknowledging the difficulty that they face. They are in a center of satanic worship. The city had a large temple dedicated to the God of healing who was represented as a snake. In spite of the hostile environment, they have held fast to the Christian faith.

We can take comfort in the fact that Jesus knows the circumstances of our life. Whatever difficulty we find ourselves in, God knows about it. We are not alone. Sometimes we may feel like God has abandoned us, but He has not.

And further commendation from Christ concerns their long standing faithfulness. We see reference to events that occurred in the past. Antipas was a person of faith who was known to this church. We don't know him today, but we have written witness to his character. He was a faithful witness who was martyred because of his belief in God. And so, we can conclude that this church has stood faithful to God for many years.

Yet there is a problem in the church.

Revelation 2:14

But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality.

Let me remind us of the reference being used here. In Numbers chapters 22-24, we find the story of Balaam. He was a false prophet that was hired by Israel's enemy, King Balak of Moab, to pronounce a curse on them. But every time that he attempted to do so, words of blessing came from his lips. By this God was showing that He will defend His people from attack. So the frontal assault completely failed. What to do?

Numbers 31:16

Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.

When Israel could not be defeated through a frontal assault, Balaam counseled that the King have women of Moab seduce the men of Israel and lead them into being unfaithful to God. That is the kind of thing going on that church. There are those who are seducing the members of this church to become unfaithful to God.

What is the essence of the attack? It is to get Christians to care more about the things of this world, than they care about the spiritual things of God. In my opinion, this very problem is rampant in the American Church. Leaving aside the liberal churches that don't even take the Bible seriously, we are still left with a real problem.

Much of the church is caught up in materialism. We invented a religion that accommodated that desire. It is called the Prosperity Gospel. They teach that God never wants you to be sick or poor. Well, OK, nobody wants to be sick or poor, including me. But when that becomes the goal of church, we are in real trouble.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not some self-help philosophy. If we are coming to church because we are looking for a material blessing, we are doing it all wrong. We must come to worship God because we are sinners deserving of eternal separation from God. We deserve Hell.

But God in His mercy, provided salvation in Jesus Christ. We come to worship God because of what He has already done for us. Not because He is some great cosmic vending machine in the sky. God does want to bless His children. There is no doubt about that.

But the important blessing we must seek is the development of Christian character. We must be primarily about being transformed to become more like Christ in all that we do. It is the transformation of character that brings real blessing. Money pales in comparison.

The other thing we must understand is that too many people come to church because they want a quick fix to an immediate problem. And sometimes we have to deal with that immediate problem before we can consider long term solutions.

But Christianity is not supposed to be a crisis management center. Again, though, there are times we have to go into crisis mode. Christianity is designed to be a maintenance program. Hopefully, a preventative maintenance program.

I see people come to church because their life is a mess and they want help. Good. I am so very glad they came. Please let us try to help. But all too often, as soon as the immediate issue is resolved to a tolerable level, they leave and go right back into the same situation.

And they continue to do the very same things that got them into trouble in the first place. So they wind up in a never ending loop, repeating the same excruciatingly painful scenario over and over. Because they are looking for an external solution rather than an internal solution. They are looking to the things of this world, rather than the transforming power of Christ.

That is how Balaam weakened the nation of Israel. That is how Satan was working to weaken the church. Turn their thought and desires from God to the temporary things of this world. Nice looking women. Sure would be fun. And sin is fun for a short period of time. But it will cost you everything.

Revelation 2:15

'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

As I mentioned when we studied the message to Ephesus, that we cannot be sure exactly who these people were. But God said that he hated them. We cannot be certain that we are correctly identifying the right group. But evidence from the writing of the early church fathers suggest that this is a group that is attempting to compromise with pagan religions and seeks to merge those pagan beliefs with Christianity. Well, that fits into the context of what is going on in Pergamum.

Don't get me wrong. God never said that we were to live some dour, miserable existence. God intended for us to have fun and enjoy life. In the OT, there were specific times Israel was commanded to have parties, festivals, celebrations. Lest we forget, there are certain activities that God created for the pleasure and satisfaction of humanity. He said, go forth and do it a lot.

So how does God feel about a church that is contaminating His word with the philosophies of this world? Philosophies that seek to focus on not on God, but on the temporary pleasures that this world offers?

Revelation 2:16

Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

God says that He is bringing that romphia to the church. 1st Peter 4:17 tells us that judgment begins with the house of God. God will get his own church in order.

Revelation 2:17

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

The hidden manna is generally thought to refer to Christ or the knowledge of Christ. Manna was given to Israel to give them physical life. Here it seems to be used in a spiritual sense. This is what Christ does. He gives us spiritual life. And the true nature of the Messiah was hidden in the Old Testament Scriptures to be revealed at the right time, when Jesus came.

The white stone has several possible meanings. In Roman culture, a white stone was given sometimes by a court to an individual acquitted of a criminal charge. That person then had proof that he was not held guilty. It was also used as a ticket for admittance to certain events. It was also used in voting. A white stone for acceptance. A black stone for rejection.

Whatever it means exactly. Best evidence points to its meaning being centered on acceptance. Not guilty and admitted to the Kingdom could be a reasonable explanation.

The new name, I believe, has to do with a new identity. Paul says that in Christ we become a new creature. His own name changed from Saul to Paul. He had a new identity in Christ and so a new name.

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