

Eastertide Revelation Letters #4

Letter to Pergamum

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We are in a series in Revelation 1-3 but before we get to that today, I'd like to talk to you about the zeal of Phineas found in Numbers 25. Here, the Israelites are traveling in the desert near Moab and the Moabites entice them to sin.

Number 25: 1-3

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, **2** who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. **3** So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

Following this, there is a plague and the Israelites cry out to God in front of Moses and Aaron. God says to put to death everyone who is involved in this sin. *While they are doing this*, in front of everyone, an Israelite walks by them with a Midianite woman and goes into his tent. Phineas, the grandson of Aaron, stands up and gets his spear and goes into the tent and kills them both. Then the plague stops.

This is a fairly shocking passage in the Bible: here is a question for you: What is the place in your life that walks you into sin, into turning away from God towards other things, that you are unwilling to kill? You say that you can manage this, I can hold onto it, I don't have to get rid of it. Hold onto this while you read Revelation 2: 1

Rev 2:12-17

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. **13** I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed 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.

17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.



Every letter to the seven churches all begin the same way: To the angel of the church of XXXX, these are the words of him . Here there are different ways of depicting Jesus.

Revelation 1 gave us a beautiful picture of Jesus with his shining face, bronze feet, white robe, the sword coming out of his mouth, etc. This particular picture is one of many you can find online.

John sees this glorious depiction of Jesus on the Island of Patmos speaking to seven churches. This week, Jesus is depicted as the one with the double edged sword.

Rev 2: 12

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

These images go back to the prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah) or the Book of the Law (first 5 books of the Bible). At the end of Isaiah the Messiah is depicted as the servant of God, who will come and save Israel.

Isa 49: 1- 3

1 Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations:

Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother’s womb he has spoken my name.

2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.

3 He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.”

Pergamum



This is a photo of my mom and my sister Caroline when they went on a tour Turkey of the seven churches in Revelation. In Roman times, there was a mail route to all of these cities.

Here you see an amphitheater at the Acropolis in Pergamum. You can see a very small dot at the top which is a person: this holds 10,000 people and is an actual place where people lived and did things:



Pergamum



Here is another beautiful overlook: it's easy to forget these are REAL PLACES!

Rev 2:13a I know where you live—where Satan has his throne.

SATAN (Accuser or hostile opponent or the one who incites turning away from sin: this is apostasy.) Pergamum is where Satan has his throne: you can think of this place as a stronghold of the enemy but there is another way to look at it. In Berlin, there is The Pergamon Museum. In the late 1800s, they did excavation and found this in the city. Here you see a giant recreation:

Pergamum Altar



This altar is 36m wide, 33m deep. The base is decorated to represent the battle in Greek mythology between giants and Olympian gods. At the top, there is another depiction of the legendary founder of Pergamum who was wounded by Achilles in the Trojan War. This was the center of worship in Pergamum where the people offered sacrifices as

drinks so they could worship. So it's not a stretch to think of this as the throne of Pergamum, the place of Satan the adversary has his throne.

Rev 2:13b Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Persecution in the early church was very common. Even though you live in the city, you haven't renounced your faith in this place. You've done well here to hold onto my name amidst persecution. Last week we learned about a law giving Romans the opportunity to make accusations about people and throw them into prison for 10 days.

Antipas was a bishop of Pergamum and was ordained by John (like Polycarp from last week), according to tradition. He was martyred, burned to death, in a giant bull-shaped altar. He is also the patron saint of teeth and tooth-aches in some church traditions.

In the midst of all this, Jesus offered encouragement to the believers because they held to His name.

But there is also rebuke:

14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

First of all, Balak and Balaam from Numbers 22:35 is a weird story but also one of my favorite stories, too (because it's so weird!).

All the Israelites come out of Egypt and encounter and conquer peoples in the desert. They become known by the people who live there and these people groups are scared of them. One of these is King Balak, a Moabite, who has an idea to talk to Balaam, a neutral person who is neither an Israelite nor a Moabite: he just knows about God and follows God. Balak asks Balaam to curse the Israelites. At first, God says no but then he is allowed to go but only to speak what God tells him. Balaam is riding along on his donkey to curse the Israelites. The donkey keeps sitting down and three times, he beats the donkey. Now they are in a narrow place and the donkey's mouth is opened by God and the donkey says "Why are you beating me; have I ever done anything like this before?" And God opens Balaam's eye and ahead of them on the road, he sees an Angel of the Lord. But after this, the Angel leaves and they just continue on their way. When they arrive at an overlook, Balak asks Balaam to curse the Israelites and he makes sacrifices in preparation but then Balaam *blesses* the Israelites. Balak says he is paying him to

curse the Israelites and this routine is repeated 4-5 times in Numbers 22-24. Instead of cursing the Israelites, Balaam blessed them. This passage is a bit confusing; what is wrong with Balaam blessing them?

But in Numbers 31, Moses explains that instead of cursing the Israelites, afterwards Balaam taught the women in Moab to incite the Israelite men to sin.

Numbers 25:1-3

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, **2** who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. **3** So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

This weird story has a very sad ending: people are led astray and a bunch of people die.

Rev 2: 5 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.

It isn't really clear about what the Nicolaitans taught. What we do know is that the Nicolaitans are an early sect of Christianity: Polycarp had a disciple Arrian and he writes about heresies in the early church. He mentions the Nicolaitans but no one tells what the heresy was. All we know is that they had false teaching: this passage is actually the closest we have to knowing what it was: something to do with Balaam and Balak:

These Christians are holding firm in Christ and yet are also standing on the other side and engaging in the worship of the city, their sacrifices, their sexual immorality. Somehow they think it's OK to stand in both places. They have a foot in both camps: How might we also have a foot in both camps? We proclaim Jesus, we acknowledge what he has done, and then we also engage in the worship of the culture around us. How might you be doing this? Consider these questions:

- What are you giving yourself over to?
- What does your worship of things look like?
- What are you giving your time, thoughts, money, and effort ?
- How are you standing in this culture and making yourself OK apart from God?
- Do you have addictions like alcohol, pot, eating, indulging in food, chips, video games, Youtube, pornography, etc?
- Do you draw on other people to tell you you are OK?

- How does the sexual immorality of this culture impact your marriage or your singleness?
- What is the thing that you are obsessing about in your mind, apart from God?
- What is THAT THING?

Jesus says they do well to stand in his name but they are also engaging in another place as well.

Each letter begins with an image of the speaker and each ends with an exhortation:

17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

This is my favorite part! *To the one who overcomes it is also* at the end of the Revelation. There is a video of the Fiji rugby team standing around at the end of the game singing “We Have Overcome” This is a beautiful video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ParyHNZ_JIQ

Overcome means to be victorious or to triumph. As we think about standing in two opposing places, what does it mean to overcome? It doesn't mean to try harder to get things right so I can get things from Jesus. But the reality is that you have already overcome because you are following Jesus. But there is a victorious part: we are both encouraged and rebuked!

We need to take note of the ways we worship in the culture around us: we need to know that following Jesus is to overcome, to be a radical disciple is to overcome. In each of the passages, we receive a different thing. Here we receive three things:

1. **Hidden manna.** As the Israelites wandered in the desert, every morning they picked up white stuff and asked, “what is it?” and that means “manna.” This is the bread of life; this white stuff is in place of planting gardens and it solved the problem of feeding so many people. So Jesus says he will give the FOOD OF LIFE: The food for us to live forever with Christ. It's the break of life when there is nothing else to sustain us.
2. **A White Stone.** This word “stone” is only used in one other place in the NT but there it is translated as “VOTE.” **Act 26:10** **And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.**

This white stone is the vote of Jesus, *his vote in your favor*, your salvation which says “you are with me, I am voting in your favor” and there is a new name written on it for you.

3. **You have a new name**

I’ve had a plaque with “*MARK: strong defender*” for over 30 years hanging up on the wall and I saw this every day. Mark was the name my parents gave me. I’ve gotten to name three children and put a lot of thought into what these names should be. This new name is from the heavenly father, naming us, giving me a white stone. Your stone, vote, salvation is known only to you with its new meaning and purpose.

Know that you stand with Christ but also engage in the worship of the city around us and we need to think about that and root it out and address it and engage with one another over this.

Where are we allowing our culture to turn us from Jesus? But we don’t turn around by our own striving: he gives us a new name as his child. These are the things we look forward to.

Amen!