



The Seven Churches: Pergamos

The Geography and Topography

Pergamos was a city of Mysia. This was part of the Roman province of Asia. The city was located in the Caicus Valley on the Selinus River which flowed directly through the city. The Ketios River flowed along the cities walls. Both of these rivers were small tributaries of the Caicus River about three miles away. None of these waterways were of great size; the Caicus was only navigable by small craft. The sea was about fifteen miles away.

A hill between the Selinus and the Ketios formed the topographic basis for

the city. It was here that the acropolis was located with the chief temples and theatres.

The Politics and Economy

The early inhabitants of the town were Greeks. The independent Greek dynasty of the Attalid kings was founded here, the first king being Attalus I (241-197 BC).

Throughout the Attalid dynasty, the city grew in wealth and splendor. Art and literature were greatly encouraged. There was amassed a great library of 200,000 volumes. In relation to this it is of note that these volumes were made of parchment which was developed and first used here. In fact, our word, *parchment*, is a derivative of the name *Pergamos*. The city was also renowned for its ointments and pottery.

Attalus III, the last king of the Attalid dynasty, gave the city to the Roman government upon his death in 133 BC. Aristonicus, the son of Attalus III, tried to seize the city, but was defeated by the Romans. At this point, the Roman province of Asia was formed with Pergamos as the capital.

Pergamos was not only a center of politics, but was also the largest religious center of the area. Gradually, the political front moved to nearby Smyrna, but Pergamos still remained the major seat of religion and a place of great wealth. The economy provided for elaborate buildings. Especially notable was the altar of Zeus standing at over 40 feet in height.

The Religious Background

One of the titles given by the Romans to the city was, Thrice Neokoros; there were three temples built to Roman emperors who were worshipped as gods. There were four main temples in

Pergamos, dedicated to the gods, Zeus, Dionysus, Athena, and Asklepios. A school of medicine was attached to the temple of Asklepios. Invalids from all parts of Asia would gather here and sleep out in the temple court. Supposedly, the god would cause the priests and physicians to have dreams as to how to heal the maladies. The altar of Zeus was a very large and elaborate structure and that was world renowned.

Jews, as early as 130 BC, enjoyed citizenship in Pergamos by official decree. By the first century, many Jews were a part of the society; some brought their religion with them while others simply assimilated with the Greeks and Romans of the city.

Christianity spread here quickly from Jerusalem. The Revelation gives this city as one of the locations of the church in Asia. Persecutions also came quickly to the church here. Information from scripture (Revelation) and from history, it appears that the disciple, Antipas, may have been one of the first to be “officially” executed by the Roman government.

It is also noted that these Christians lived “where Satan’s throne is.” How appropriate for a place with such a grand altar to Zeus. On a modern historical note about this altar, Nazi-era architect, Albert Speer, designed the *Zeppelinhaupttribüne* (the large grandstand) with the Führer’s pulpit in the center, after the Pergamos altar.

The Letter — Revelation 2:12-17

Other than this reference, the history of the church at Pergamos is unknown. Still, we can learn much from this brief letter.

Consider *Christ* as He presents Himself (**Revelation 2:12**). Again Christ describes Himself in such way as to show He was especially qualified to say the things which needed to be said. He had the sharp sword with two edges. This is the manner in which the word of God is described (**Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 6:17**). The sword has long been the symbol of authority. Christ has all authority (**Matthew 28:18**). Evidently Jesus was telling this church He had the authority to say the things which needed to be said. This letter is profitable for us even if we learn nothing else from it. It is not what we feel, think, like, or what we have always done or not done which is the authority. God, who has all authority, has given all authority to Jesus (**Matthew 28:18**). Jesus, in turn, sent the apostles to guide men into all truth (**John 16:12-13**). The Holy Spirit revealed this (**1Corinthians 2:9-13**). This word teaches by direct statement or command, by apostolic example, and by *necessary* inference. In this manner we must find authority for all teaching and practice in religion. All in the church at Pergamos were not content so to do. Let us learn.

Consider *the good things* in regard to this church. Again, we find that Jesus *knew* (**Revelation 2:13**). Jesus knew that they held fast His name. Even on Satan’s “turf” they believed in Christ and His authority and had not denied Him. One of their number had even died because of his standing for Christ. Surely, we can learn from this. Surely, we ought to be ashamed to let unkind things said to us and about us hinder us from standing for the Lord. Jesus also knew that they had not denied His faith. If anyone ever denies His faith, he is left with no way to please God (**Hebrews 11:6**). This statement in regard to not denying faith is closely connected with holding fast the name.

Consider *the bad things* which the Lord knew about the church in Pergamos. He knew the bad influence in which they lived. Perhaps they could or could not have done something about this. Either way, they should have sought to be as good an influence as possible (**Genesis 13:9-13**).

Another bad thing in this church was that they tolerated false teachers (**Revelation 2:14-15**). We may not know exactly what the false doctrine was, but we can learn that God and Christ hate false doctrine. Christians must have the same attitude toward false doctrine (**Galatians 1:6-9**).

Consider *the requirements* which the Lord gave. He called upon them to repent (**Revelation 2:16**). Erring Christians must repent. The innocent ones were obligated to insist upon the guilty ones repenting. When erring Christians will not repent, they must be marked (**Romans 16:17**). The Lord then insisted that these hear Him (**Revelation 2:17**). Surely we can see the application of this for us (**Hebrews 2:1-3**).

Consider *the promises* Christ made (**Revelation 2:16**). Jesus then promised to give the hidden manna to those who overcame (**Revelation 2:17**). Like the Israelites of long ago, God will furnish. However, all do not overcome (**2Peter 2:20-21**). Incidentally, Peter said this in regard to people who followed Baalam, as were some of these at Pergamos. Then Christ promised a white stone with a new name written there. If we will overcome, too, one day we will know the stone.