

Wandering Stars Part III

Jesus' Message to Pergamum and Sardis

Rev 2:12 "And to the angel of the **church in Pergamum** write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

¹³ "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

3:1 "And to the angel of the **church in Sardis** write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

⁴ Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

(Revelation 2:12-17; 3-1-6)

Scripture Alone or Only Scripture?

A lot of people get *sola scriptura* backwards. Rather than the idea of Scripture alone, they hold to “only Scripture,” a kind of doctrine that says unless I can point to a verse in the Bible, I am not justified in doing or believing anything in this life. Need a job? Find a verse. Have a science question? A proof-text will answer it. Not sure what diet to do? Daniel will tell you. Have some giants in your life that you need to slay? Goliath can help. Questions about whether you should marry this particular girl? If you can find her name in the Bible, you are on the right track. Ok, I’ve never heard this last one, but I’m sure someone has believed it. This view of the Bible says that **God gave his word as an exhaustive manual for everything**. It can be terribly paralyzing when you find out it doesn’t address all questions earth; and for some who refuse

to admit this, the Bible becomes a kind of book of magic that you can use to say just about anything you like.

This is not the doctrine of *sola scriptura* as the Reformation explained it. The doctrine is laid out in our Confession of Faith, which is a helpful guide for understanding the doctrine we find in the Bible. LBC 1.1 says, “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all *saving knowledge, faith, and obedience*;” and 1.6, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for *his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life*, is ... necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.” As Sam Waldron explains the meaning, “The Bible is not all-sufficient for every conceivable purpose.” Rather, “It is nothing less than sufficien[t] for the redemption of man both individually and corporately in the whole ethical and religious sphere of life.”¹

What the Reformers and those who came after in their tradition taught is that **all you need to know to worship God** the way he desires to be worshiped is found in the Bible. **All you need to know to be saved** from God’s wrath and brought to eternal life is found in the Scriptures. **All you need to know about what to believe about God** is found in the Scriptures. **All you need to know to live a life that is pleasing to him**, morally

¹ Sam E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Evangelical Press, 2016), 52.

and ethically, is found in the Scriptures. These great Christian fathers in the Faith were doing something very important that many have tried. They were showing the Church the true measuring stick and the tool by which people be sure if they followed it by faith (all important), they would live under the grace of God. Anything else that comes along and claims additional information *regarding these things* is deadly.

This is something the two churches that we will look at today were in desperate need of. The churches of Pergamum and Sardis are parallel churches and Jesus' words to them both deal with this matter. One has been called “[The Worldly Church](#)” and the other “[The Dying Church](#).” These are sometimes directly related to one another—worldliness leads to spiritual death. In this case, viewing these ideas together can help us think about that kind of final outcome, while giving us the remedy to the problem.

Pergamum and Sardis

As we have been going through the seven churches, we have [looked at pairings](#) according to the literary structure of the letters. These pairings come to us in the form of a chiasm of the seven churches.

- A. **Ephesus**: No strengths to commend. Jesus will reject the entire church unless there is repentance (2:5)
- B. **Smyrna**: Faithful. Testing from “the synagogue of Satan” (2:9). No weakness of the church.
- C. **Pergamum**. Unfaithful, fallen into sin, but a faithful group still.
 - D. **Thyatira**. Central position, longest letter, contains all seven common elements of the seven letters. Idolatry/Worshiping the Beast is a major theme of the book. Jezebel is a false teacher, charged with deceiving God’s servants (2:20). Climax of unfaithfulness.
- C’. **Sardis**. Unfaithful, fallen into sin, but a faithful group still. Still, worse than Pergamum.
- B’. **Philadelphia**: Faithful. Testing from “the synagogue of Satan” (3:9). No weakness of the church.
- A’. **Laodicea**: No strengths to commend, but harsher than Ephesus. Jesus will reject the entire church unless there is repentance (3:16)²

Today, we are looking at Pergamum and Sardis, the 3rd and 5th churches in the order. As with the others, each has **its own literary structure** forming both a sevenfold order you would find in a letter,

- (1)Address
- (2)Identification of Christ
- (3)Claim of knowledge
- (4)Evaluation
- (5)Duty
- (6)Promise and/or Threat
- (7)Conclusion

And **an internal structure** dominated by a central point:

² See **Paul M. Hoskins**, *The Book of Revelation: A Theological and Exegetical Commentary* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2017), 119-121.

Pergamum – Two edges of the Sword: For and Against

A. ^{2:12} To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

B. “The words of him who has the sharp **two-edged sword**.

C. Positive: ¹³ I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you **hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith** even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

C'. Negative: ¹⁴ But I **have a few things against you**: you have **some there who hold** the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ So also you have **some who hold** the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

B'. ¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them **with the sword of my mouth**.

A'. ¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says **to the churches**. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

Sardis

A. ^{3:1} To the angel of the church in Sardis write: “The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

B. I know **your works**, You have **the reputation** (‘name’) of being alive, but you are dead.

C. ² **Wake up**, and strengthen what remains and is about to die,

D. **for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent.**

C'. ³ If you will not **wake up**, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

B'. ⁴ Yet you have still a few **names** in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot **his name** out of the book of life. I will confess **his name** before my Father and before his angels.

A'. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

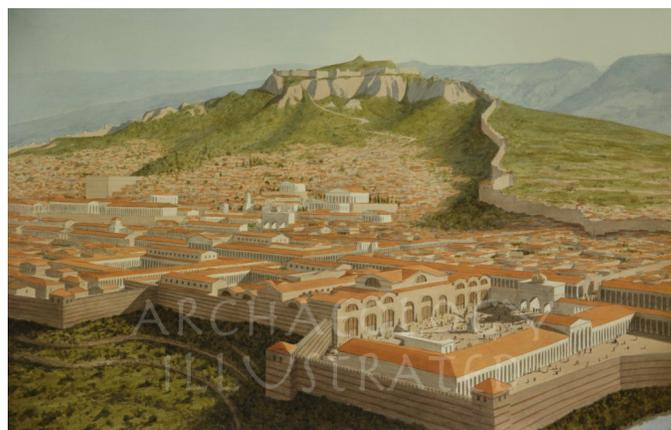
This is the first of our pairings where the structures are **not immediately apparent as having the same number of points**. Nevertheless, each does have **a central point**. With Pergamum, it deals with teachings that they “**hold**” (**vv. 13-15**). With Sardis it has to do with **repentance**. These are related.

These two churches have **several similarities**, both in terms of history and in terms of the letters. As for their history, both cities “**occupy steep—and largely waterless—acropoleis rising from fertile river plains, and both have considerable mineral resources in the vicinity. Further, on account of these defensive qualities and natural riches, both ... were turned into strongholds with fortified residential quarters attached.**”³

³ **Ruth Bielfeldt**, “Pergamum and Sardis: Models of Neighborliness, in Andrea M. Berlin and Paul J. Kosmin (eds.), *Spear-Won Land. Sardis from the King’s Peace to the Peace of Apamea* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019): 167.



Pergamon Reconstruction



Sardis Reconstruction

As it regards the letters themselves, a common point regards the idea of a **name**. Pergamum “holds fast my name” (Rev 2:13), while Sardis has a “reputation/name of being alive, but you are dead” (3:1), even though there are still “a few names” (4) in Sardis who are walking with the Lord and he will never “blot out their name” (5) from the book of life but will “confess his name” before the Father and his angels (5b). As with several of the churches, **repentance** is a common idea in both letters (2:16; 3:3). **Ritual purity** is common to both, which we would expect if this portion of Revelation is about preparing the churches for holy war. Pergamum must not eat food sacrificed to idols or practice sexual immorality (2:14). Sardis is addressed as people who have not soiled their garments (3:4). There is a **coming** of Christ to both churches.

https://www.academia.edu/39888266/Pergamum_and_Sardis_Models_of_Neighborliness_in_Andrea_M_Berlin_and_Paul_J_Kosmin_ed_Spear_Won_Land_Sardis_from_the_Kings_Pea ce_to_the_Peace_of_Apamea_Madison_WI_2019_165_190.

Jesus will come quickly and make war against Pergamum (2:16), while he will come “like a thief” to Sardis (3:3). The prize at the end is white in both cases. For Pergamum Jesus will give the “white stone” (2:17), while at Sardis he promises the saints will walk in white (3:5).⁴

Pergamum

We deal first with Pergamum, the third of the seven churches. We have not mentioned this explicitly yet, so it is good to know that there is another reason why the churches appear in the order that they do. If you were to begin in Ephesus and make your way north and then east around the circlet, you would find that each church in order is the next church in geography. It is almost like Christ is making his own missionary journey to the churches.



⁴ These last two are noticed in a couple of interesting chaisms at “Literary Parallels of the 7 CHURCHES,” (Jan 7, 2016), <http://master1844-dc.blogspot.com/2016/01/literary-parallels-of-7-churches.html>.

While Ephesus and Smyrna are both by the sea, Pergamum takes us inland a bit and is the most northerly of the seven churches. Pliny called it, “the most famous place of Asia” (Pliny, *Natural History* 5.126). It has 120,000 residents or about half the number as Ephesus and Smyrna. As we saw last time, “Pergamum” means “Citadel; capitol.” It is therefore no coincidence that Jesus tells therefore tells them, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is” (12). But what could “Satan’s throne” refer to? There are a couple of strong possibilities related to the cults of the city.

The first is the cult of *Asclepius* which was the epicenter of the Imperial Cult at Pergamum. Asclepius is the god of medicine and healing. This son of Apollo, he is the father of Hygieia (Hygiene, cleanliness) and Panacea (Universal Remedy) among others. Most importantly, he is always depicted having a serpent wrapped around his staff (not unlike many of our medical/hospital logos: see below). Curiously, he is the second most powerful god of the old world to be called *Theos Soter* (Savior God), a title that Christians gave to Jesus. This makes a good candidate for the throne of Satan.



Caduceus



Rod of Asclepius



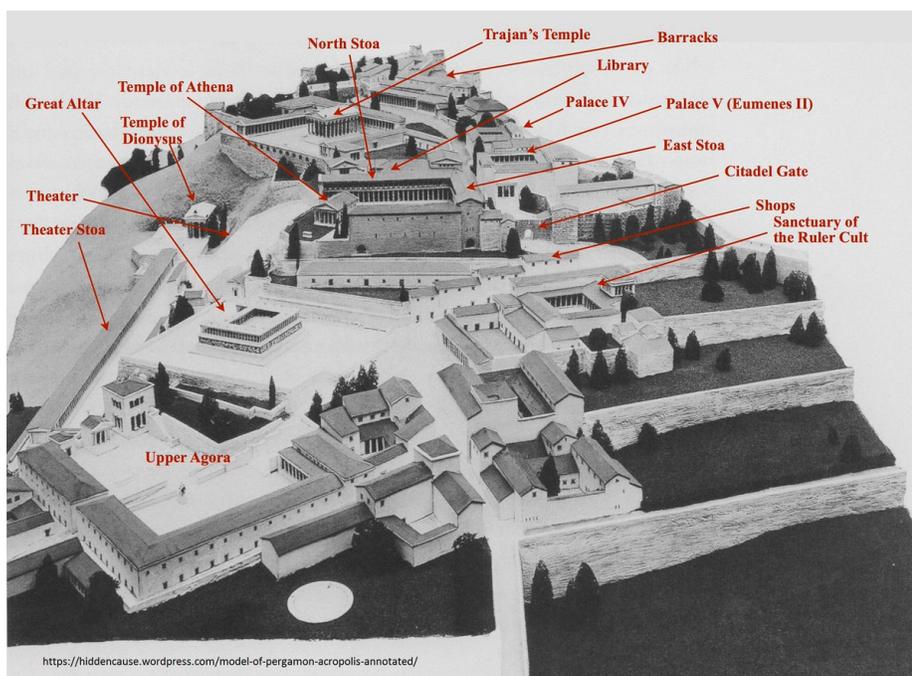
The honor of most powerful belongs to **Zeus** and he is our second contender for the source of the “Satan’s throne” idea.⁵ Zeus, the “God of gods” in the Roman pantheon, had **a monstrously huge altar** dedicated to him in the city, and this may in fact be the reason why Pliny said what he said about the city. Visitors flocked here, in no small part because of this altar. “**In the 2nd cent. BC came one of the greatest centres of art and culture in the ancient world, reaching the height of its glory in the reign of Eumenes II (197–159). This Eumenes erected the great altar of Zeus the Saviour [Zeus Soter].**”⁶ The altar was nearly intact in the early 20th century when archeologists disassembled it and put it in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin where it resides to this day. “It

⁵ Graves sees Asclepius as the most likely candidate. **Graves, David E.** “Jesus Speaks to Seven of His Churches, Part 1.” *Bible and Spade* 23.2 (Spring 2010): 53.

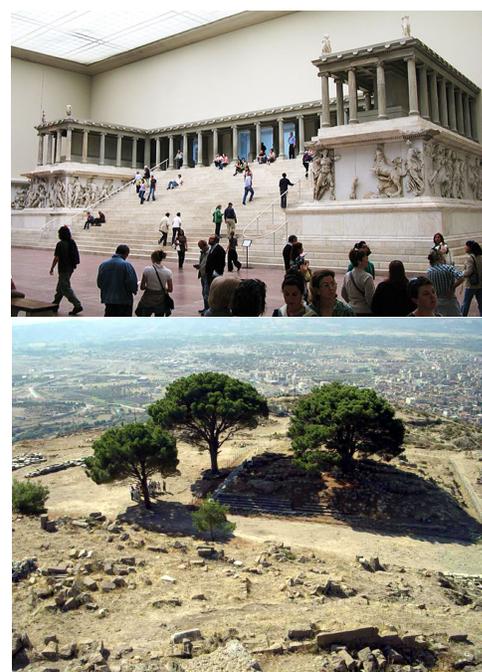
https://www.academia.edu/6962453/Jesus_Speaks_to_Seven_of_His_Churches_Part_1. I tend to think it is the throne of Zeus.

⁶ **F. L. Cross** and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1264.

is built on three sides of a square, to make a giant chair or throne,”⁷ with “the temple dominating the city.”⁸



Acropolis at Pergamon, Altar of Zeus center-left



The Great Altar of Zeus, Pergamon Museum, Berlin (above); The altar foundation in Pergamon, 2005

This god **Zeus** (see n. 9) is never depicted with a snake. He does, however, sometimes transform *into one*, for example when his mother Rhea refused to let him marry because of his insatiable lust for women (which would cause problems for his wife). Upon hearing her decree, Zeus threatened to violate her. When she caught wind, she transformed herself into a vicious serpent. But Zeus did the same, tangled himself in a knot with his mother that could

⁷ Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide*, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 698.

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 758.

not be untied, and violated her.⁹ This all has an eerie similarity to the specific doctrinal threat that Jesus calls out at Pergamum.

Given these connections, scholars have written, “To the extent that the ascendancy of Christianity prompted the ancient religions ... to be regarded as pagan, ... the gods came to be associated with the devil, especially within the monastic-ascetic controversy with paganism, or became concentrated in paganism, beginning with the altar of Zeus at Pergamum being called ‘Satan’s throne’ (Rev. 2:13).”¹⁰ And, “The Book of Revelation designates pagan gods as *daimonia* (9:20), just as Zeus is equated with Satan (2:13).”¹¹

Along these lines, one archeologist has said, “Pergamum, with all of its temple and the prominence of the Emperor cult, was certainly a concentrated center of demonic activity (Caird 1993: 37; Martin 1956: 69; Wood

⁹ Kevin Osborn and Dana L. Burgess, “Master of the Universe,” excerpted from *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Classical Mythology* (2004), Infoplease, <https://www.infoplease.com/culture-entertainment/mythology-folklore/classical-mythology-master-universe>. Another deity, many assume to be Hades, who was also worshiped in Pergamum, is depicted as a serpent (see Vlizos Stavros, “Zeus,” *Encyclopaedia of the Hellenic World: Asia Minor* (6/19/2002), <http://asiaminor.ehw.gr/forms/fLemmaBodyExtended.aspx?lemmaId=8308>). His name is Zeus Meilichios [Easy-to-be-entreated]. If he is Hades, he is Zeus’ brother. But as tantalizing as this connection of Hades and Satan might be, I do not believe Meilichios is the reason for the language “throne of Satan.”

¹⁰ Carsten Colpe, “Devil,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999–2003), 823.

¹¹ Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 273.

1961: 264; Johnson 2001: 440). And in fact the first temple in Asia to be dedicated to the emperor cult was built in Pergamum in 29 BC by Augustus.” This gives us the kind of supernatural background to being to understand Christ’s words to these people.

The Lord *addresses* his church, “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write...” (Rev 2:12). He then *identifies* himself, as we have seen consistently, with language from the vision John saw of Jesus in chapter 1. “The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword” (12). In these words are two things we’ve discussed in The past. First, this is the language of *holy war* that reminds of the Angel of the LORD when Joshua met this same person who has identified himself this way to John and not Pergamum. This is the divine warrior, and he is teaching his church here about holy war. Second, this language closely *links Pergamum with Mars*, the god of war, in this interesting way that John is linking the churches and their failures to the wandering stars of the heavens. I’ll come back to this point later when we are able to see better how this matters.

Next, Jesus demonstrates his *omniscience* by telling them what he *knows* about them. This is the structural center of the letter. “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s

throne is” (13). We’ve discussed the probable geographical meaning behind this. But it is the theological point that is truly remarkable. Jesus is showing them that temptations could not be higher, for they are located literally in the very heart of Satan’s territory. His throne, his capitol, his castle, his temple ... it is here in this city. Now, I have a speculation about how a person could make sense of this more than as just a metaphor, a metaphor that if you could not make sense of it really would lessen the impact of what is being said. I’m not dogmatic about this, but I find it interesting.

Recall how in Daniel you have “princes” over nations—the prince of Persia, the prince of Greece, and Michael the prince of Israel (Dan 10:13, 20; 12:1). These princes (*archons*) are heavenly beings. The background behind how that works is Deuteronomy 32:7-9 when the Most High gave set over the nations of the earth 70 “sons of God” to rule them. In Jewish thinking, there was also a “prince of Rome.” They often identified him as someone named Samael.

The *Jewish encyclopedia* tells us that he is the “Prince of the demons.” This is the same title Jesus gives Beelzebub (Matt 12:24). In that same place, Jesus says, “If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself” (26), thereby giving us a close link to Beelzebub and Satan and Samael. Samael, by the way,

means “**venom [think serpent] of God.**” In this way, we can make a good argument that Zeus/Jupiter, the high God of Greece and Rome, is the same person as Samael/Satan, the “**prince of this world**” (**John 12:31**), because Satan’s throne is Zeus’s throne.¹² Rome ruled the world at this time; Satan therefore did in heavenly places. Therefore, Satan-Zeus makes his home here in Pergamum where perhaps his greatest altar-throne in all the ancient world was located. That makes Jesus message to the church here all the more vital to heed.

What then is Jesus’ *evaluation* of Pergamum in light of this evil throne? First, he has a **positive message**. “**You hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells**” (**13b**). The first thing I want to point out here is how this persecution of a man named Antipas connects Pergamum to Smyrna through suffering. But Smyrna is “**about to suffer,**” which the Christians in Pergamum have already suffered persecution and martyrdom.

Given that Revelation is in one sense **written to all seven churches**, the fact that the Christians at Pergamum went through this ordeal already would have been a **great comfort**

¹² See my paper, **Douglas Van Dorn**, “Satan, Zeus, Baal, and the Prince of Rome,” <https://www.dougvandorn.com/Satan%20Zeus%20and%20Baal%201-7.pdf>.

to the Christians in Smyrna. And it ought to be a comfort to us as well. For it is in fact possible to not recant the faith even under the greatest duress. We have 2,000 years of this behind us to read about and learn from through books like *Foxxe's Book of Martyrs*. But the churches here were only just beginning that process of understanding the cost that sometimes comes with being a Christian.

It should be pointed out the magnificent thing that is said about this Antipas, of whom we know precious little, save that later historians like Simon Metaphrastes (10th cent. AD) who said that he died by being slowly roasted to death in a brazen bowl during the reign of Domitian.¹³ Antipas is given the same title as Jesus in Rev 1:5, “Faithful witness.” Furthermore, his name means “in place of the father.” Yet, he shares this name with Herod Antipas, the man responsible for putting John the Baptist to death. Thus, his ironic name has been an encouragement to all Christians for though he shares Herod's name, he is actually a type of Christ who offers himself as a sacrifice to God, also becoming the first (but only named) of the martyrs in Revelation.¹⁴

¹³ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 80. If this is true, the an early date for the book is much more difficult to sustain.

¹⁴ A good short discussion is Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, vol. 1, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old

The second thing to point out is how they **held fast to Christ's name** and **did not deny the Faith**. This takes us back to the opening thoughts of **the importance of doctrine**. The essence of what Jesus is saying here is that they **did not give in to heresy** regarding who Christ is (the Name of God; i.e. OT Yahweh) and the “**Faith once for all delivered to the saints**” (**Jude 3**), namely, how to be saved through the Gospel of his death, burial, and resurrection. They knew the basics of Christianity which they had heard, which the church would later recognize in **the Ecumenical Creeds**: The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, which were all drafted by representatives of the entire church of Jesus Christ in the early centuries of Christianity, and which we know is certain today from the Scripture alone. Not only did they know these basics, they **refused to compromise on them**, even in the face of great persecution. Many Christians today compromise on them and they face no persecution! Jesus encourages Pergamum greatly for their resolve.

Yet, our Lord's evaluation of this church is not entirely positive. In fact, you could argue that it is mostly *negative*. For there are **two errors** that are equally dangerous. The one

and New Testaments (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 166-67.

is giving up the basics of the faith. The other is adding to them with perversions that compromise the core teachings of Christianity.

In this case Jesus says, “But I have a few things against you: You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam” (Rev 2:14a). Balaam (or his doctrine) is the first of two wandering stars to tempt the Pergamum Christians in the city where Satan dwells. He was a pagan prophet hired by Balak, king of Moab, to pronounce a curse upon the Israelites for invading his land in the days of Moses. God prevented Balaam from cursing them when he met Balaam riding his donkey and showed himself to both with a drawn sword in his hand (Num 22:23, 31). The Angel of the LORD then caused him to bless Israel instead (35ff.).

But Balaam was not finished. Later on, he hatched a plan to get back at God and his people. He persuaded some of the women of Moab to seduce the men of Israel to “defect from the LORD” (31:16) by fornicating with them and joining with them in the worship of their pagan gods. It worked! And God punished Israel for their idolatry and spiritual adultery. Beale summarizes, “Balaam became proverbial for the false teacher who for money influences believers to enter into relationships of compromising unfaithfulness, is

warned by God to stop, and is finally punished for continuing to disobey.”¹⁵ Interestingly, he was killed with the sword by the people of Israel (Josh 13:22).

It is into this background that Jesus tells them, “Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality” (Rev 2:14b). As these are sins that also appear in the climactic center of the seven letters, I’ll save a discussion of them until next time. For now, let’s look at the next verse and then think about the more general idea of doctrine. “So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (15). We saw the Nicolaitans in Ephesus and though we know little about them, it seems that they are parallel in temptation to this teaching of Balaam. Also, recall that in the parallel in John’s Gospel, Nicolaitans (Destroyer of People) are parallel to Nicodemus (Victor over the People). The question then becomes, who are you going to listen to, false teachers which destroy you or Jesus who gives you victory and conquest?

Here, I simply want to add to the point made at the beginning about doctrine. There are good reasons why the

¹⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 249.

Reformation decided it would be important not only to retain the creeds, but to draft for their people **Confessions of Faith**. Confessions are much more robust, much longer statements of theology that deal with the entire world of systematic theology in order to help people learn about God, the Trinity, Christ, election, sin, the covenants, how a person is saved, the law, the gospel the church, the last judgment, and so on as we believe the Bible teaches it. **They do not replace the Bible**, but like a Sunday school or a sermon, they help our understanding of it in a corporate context with the church universal. Our church's Confession has 32 chapters to help foster unity of agreement, but also to help weed out heresies that creep in from false teachers which lead to our Lord viewing us like he viewed several of the churches in Revelation. And indeed, when the confessions were held to firmly, for over 200 years, there was hardly any splintering within Protestantism; nothing like we see today where people split over the color of the carpet.

But it isn't just what he said in terms of negative evaluation. It is also what our Lord says in terms of their *duty* in response. **“Therefore, repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth”**

(**Rev 2:16**). We've seen **repentance** before. It means a turning around and going the opposite way. It means stop and do what you are supposed to do. It is the first duty of a Christian after they have been converted by Christ.

The verbal tense, voice, and mood (aorist active imperative) make it an “**urgent appeal for instant change of attitude and conduct before it is too late.**”¹⁶ But **Martin Luther** taught us rightly in the first of his *Ninety-Five Thesis* that, “**When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’, he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.**” Repentance is not a one-off thing. That’s because we continue to sin and fall. Therefore, we get up and we repent again, turning back to the narrow road that we had just been on.

The punishment here is **most severe** for refusing. Jesus, the Divine Warrior, with the sword of his mouth, will bring judgment upon those who refuse his word. To put it back in our wandering stars as false teachers idea, it is as if Jesus is saying, “**If you insist, church, in following the wandering stars, those false gods with their false teachings and the destructive ramifications those have for life in Christ, then I**

¹⁶ *Robertson’s Word Pictures of the New Testament*: Rev 2:5, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/robertsons-word-pictures/revelation/revelation-2-5.html>.

will come to you like the god Ares-Mars and war against you.”

You will get what you want; you will get what you deserve.

On the other hand, Jesus does not leave the church with the threat of punishment, because punishment is nowhere near the motivator as reward and promise. In this case, the reward is sweet and wonderful. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it” (17).

To understand what Jesus is offering here, it is best to go to the parallels both at the end of Revelation, and in John’s Gospel, for they help interpret the meaning. The hidden manna has its parallel at the end of Revelation in the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Beale calls it “a metaphorical portrayal of end-time fellowship and identification with Christ, which will be consummated at the marriage supper of the Lamb and which those refusing to participate in pagan feasts will be rewarded with.”¹⁷ It contrasts with the anti-supper they were ghoulishly feasting upon because of the doctrines of Balaam when they “eat food sacrificed to idols.” Manna is the food of angels (Ps 78:24), not demons. It is the

¹⁷ Beale, 252.

bread of heaven and it belongs to those who desire eternal life and communion with Jesus Christ.

The white stone is more difficult. Sometimes a white stone was used in a court of law and given to the plaintiff in the case of an acquittal. That fits the idea of forgiveness nicely, where Jesus is reversing the guilty verdict against the overcomer who is either being charged as guilty of a crime for not participating idolatrous meals (perhaps what got Antipas killed), or for those who repent and turn from this pagan practice. According to Jewish tradition, precious stones fell along with the manna, which fits having both together.¹⁸

But I like looking at the parallels in John's Gospel and at the end of Revelation. Notice the language. "To him who overcomes ... I will give a white stone, and on the stone a new name." That's temple language, the church. The parallel at the beginning of John tells us that Jesus gave Peter a new name: "Cephas, which is translated, 'a stone.'" (John 1:42). Peter is the rock of the church, so the parallel would indicate that we get to be stones in the construction of the living temple. It is as one more parallel at the end of Revelation tells us, "And names were written on them ...

¹⁸ On these see Beale, 252-53.

and the city had twelve foundation stones” (Rev 21:12-14). Jesus is promising that his people will dwell in the temple of God forever.

Furthermore, we know that tombs were “whitewashed” to make them look nice for visitors of dead people. It is interesting that we read in the parallel at the end of John, “While it was still dark [they] saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb” (John 20:1). Jesus is alive because the stone was removed. Now Jesus gives to the conquerors the white stone of acquittal which also serves as an entrance payment to participate in the great banquet with the resurrected Christ at the end of the age. What an incredible blessing, but only for those who repent and are found in Christ.

Sardis

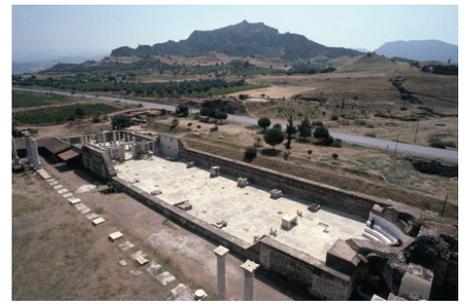
Sardis is the parallel of Pergamum, both in terms of geography and churches. Sardis was, like Pergamum, a well-fortified city. In fact, of the seven churches, it was the best protected, having a citadel on top of a three-side vertical rock face that overlooked the plains and city below. It had a huge Gymnasium, a temple to Artemis, and a large Jewish synagogue, all outside the city walls.



Temple of Artemis, Sardis



Gymnasium, Sardis
Mt. Tmolus and Citadel in
background



Synagogue, Sardis

Graves believes it “received the severest reprimand of the seven messages for accommodating its pagan surroundings,” calling it “a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.”¹⁹ I think that’s overstating the case a bit, though I can certainly see why he would say this given that this is the church Jesus calls “dead” (Rev 3:1).

Sardis was the capital of Lydia in the 7th century BC. It developed a large textile industry that made many clothes and became preoccupied with the dying of cloth, not unlike Thyatira where Lydia from who sold “purple goods” (Acts 16:14). Perhaps the most famous early Christian from Sardis is Melito (2nd cent. AD) who substantiates accounts of persecution of Christians recorded in a letter from Antonius Pius in 161. The last bishop of Sardis was Gregory (1315-1343), who oversaw the construction of a vaulted, domed,

¹⁹ Graves, “Seven Churches Part II,” 66.

https://www.academia.edu/6962573/Jesus_Speaks_to_Seven_of_His_Churches_Part_2.

and richly decorated building, which “may well prove to have been the final confident gesture of Sardis Christians prior to the Turkish onslaughts in the second half of the [14th] century.”²⁰

Probably the most relevant historical fact about Sardis is that it fell twice to enemy invaders who were able to breach the walls of the citadel. The first was in 549 BC when Cyrus the Great, who had come all the way from Babylon, sent a soldier up the vertical cliff to find an entry point and then again 350 years later in 195 BC when Lagoras of Crete led fifteen men up the same spot to breach the wall and open the gates from the inside. It therefore “became proverbial in the literature of the day to speak of Sardis’ overconfidence, pride and arrogance.”²¹ It was also destroyed along with a couple of the other cities in 17 AD by an earthquake, which took it suddenly and with no warning (they obviously rebuilt).

Jesus *addresses* them formally. “To the angel of the church in Sardis write...” (Rev 3:1). He then *identifies* himself as, “The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1b). It is interesting that he

²⁰ John Griffiths Pedley, “Sardis (Place),” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 984.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

addresses *this* church specifically with the **seven spirits**, whom we have said is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit but also the **seven stars**, which I suggest is a reference to the seven wandering planets, both of which, like the other identifications, come from the description of our powerful Lord in ch. 1. As we saw in the quote above, this is certainly a church that was **wandering far away from Christ**. And yet, their wandering is not said to come from false teachers, which makes the identification of Christ ironic. Something else was afoot in Sardis. Yet, Jesus is still the one who holds the power of the Holy Spirit, the power alone which is able to bring them to repentance.

What does Christ *know* about Sardis? The All-Knowing Lord says, “**I know your works**,” a common phrase that we have seen repeated in several churches. And what are they here? “**You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead**” (3:1c). Sardis is the dead church or the dying church, depending on how you look at it. Either way, this is not a good place to be in.

The word “**reputation**” is better translated as “**name**” (same word, *onoma*), so that we can see the parallel with Pergamum. Outwardly, they seemed full of life. That is, they had all the things that the people of this world would

want in a church. Beeke says something that seems right to me here. “No false doctrine was preached in Sardis—Christ doesn’t warn the church of Balaam’s doctrine, the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, or of the fornication of the woman Jezebel—and Sardis was proud of that.”²² No, this was a church with **all the right answers to false doctrine**, a lot like Ephesus. They had great doctrine. Beeke adds, “No doubt the minister at Sardis had a reputation for being a preacher of the gospel. He was a good preacher, and his sermons were memorable. Like the church, he had a reputation of being **alive**.” These outward appearances made them, like their city counterpart with its protective citadel, **complacent**. And their ministry had become a ministry of death.

Thus, Jesus gives them his *evaluation*. “I have not found **your works complete in the sight of my God**” (Rev 3:2). It is not acceptable to live to **please man**, by gaining a good reputation in his eyes. Church isn’t about having great programs, a massive building, or popular athletic, music, and youth ministries. This isn’t a business. But neither is it OK to **rest on your laurels**. Small churches can take just as much pride in their smallness. I know some that pride themselves in their pure doctrine so much that they believe

²² Beeke, 131.

their smallness is a direct result of their fidelity to truth. And “truth” ends up eclipsing Jesus.

Anytime a church **takes their eyes off of God** and makes something else a replacement, even good doctrine, they begin to die a slow, painful death. The only reason we are here is to worship our God, be fed and nourished by him, and learn to obey what he tells us. Anything else is a means to that end. He alone sanctifies and strengthens us, giving us all we need to face the world. And he does it thorough Christ. Not our programs. Not our preaching. Not our pure theology. After all, what is theologically wrong at Sardis? Nothing specific that we can see.

Several decades ago, **Donald Grey Barnhouse** speculated on nationwide CBS radio what it would look like if Satan were to take over an American city. He said **all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say, “Yes, sir” and “No, ma’am,” and the churches would be full every Sunday ... where Christ is not preached.**²³ This is the flip side of Pergamum, which guarded some doctrines, but

²³ **Michael Horton**, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 15.

let rampant immorality and false religion into its center. Sardis seems to have guarded it all!

Thus, our Lord gives them their *duty*. It comes at the front end of the evaluation and the back end of the threat. “Wake up ... wake up” (2-3). How can the dead wake up? Often times the Bible speaks of death as “sleep.” Right after telling them to wake up he tells them to “remember what you received and heard.” In other words, there still is something alive here, a kernel, a root. That kernel is the law and the gospel, the message of God’s righteousness and holiness, his hatred of sin, and his forgiveness through Jesus Christ. They knew this message once, but they had forgotten for whatever reason, and it caused great sleepiness to the point of death.

And yet, we may speak about them as truly being a dead church, not merely dying. For if you forget this, then there can be no life in the church, for it is the gospel that is the life of God’s people. It alone is the power of salvation, first to the Jew and then to the Gentile (Rom 1:16-17). And so I believe that the call to “wake up” is the very power of God by his Spirit bringing new life where there had been death. It is like the words of Jesus to Lazarus calling the dead man to “come out” of the grave. The word created the life.

Yet, that word is not sent to be effectual to all people. And Jesus warns them, “If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you” (Rev 3:3). This is another of the verses in these letters that have been used to teach a pre-wrath Rapture of the church, prior to a Great Tribulation. As a young boy not yet the age of 10, our church showed a movie called “A Thief in the Night” (1972), which tells the horrifying story of what happens to those who miss the Rapture and must live through the Great Tribulation. It was terrifying to this small child, especially watching so many of those people who missed it later return to Jesus only to get their heads chopped off by a guillotine.

In the idea of a Rapture, Jesus is coming *for* his people in grace. But here, Jesus is coming “*against*” the church. His coming like a thief is in judgment, the opposite of a Rapture. This would have had special meaning to this particular church, given that its citadel was twice taken by its utter lack of watchfulness due to its complacent, smug attitude that no one could penetrate its lofty, protected walls. Jesus is telling them that he will become an enemy to them, fighting to take them down because they defy him, pleasing the world but

not caring to please God. And his coming to them will be like a thief because they simply aren't watching the wall.

This, then, is **their own strange wandering star**. Not false teaching, but **trickery** of their own making that causes them to sleep. As we saw, of the wandering planets, Sardis best fits **Mercury**, the god of thieves and a trickster who fools people. How does he fool them? He is also the god of financial gain, commerce, eloquence, messages, communication, travelers, and luck. This fits Sardis to a tee. Their worldliness, their deep desire to please man, tricked them. That's his false teaching to this unsuspecting group of Christians.

It seems pretty obvious that in a culture like America has been for a hundred years, and especially in the last few decades, that this kind of message has **particular relevance** to us. It is a call to megachurches and small churches, theological churches and those that have exchanged all but the basics for worldly prestige and glory in the eyes of man. It is a temptation that grips every American—luxury, eloquence, lavishness, sensuality. Jesus tells us that if we do not remember what we have received and heard and keep it and repent that he will come against us. It is a terrible warning.

Yet, Jesus says, “You still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy” (Rev 3:4). “A few names” is the idea of a remnant, which would also have been meaningful to Sardis, for this is what the word means. The Lord has a remnant of faithful believers in just about every church, both then and today.

In this case, they are people who have not soiled their garments, more language that would have been meaningful to a city whose main industry was cloth work. Soiling them is dirtying them. In the context, this is with worldliness and the desire to gain the favor of man.

But the Lord’s message is still to the entire church and until they are physically dead *in the grave*, the message of hope still stands for any to hear. “The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels” (Rev 3:5). All this “name” language again takes us back to the parallel at Pergamum. As does the “white” language. Michael Heiser talks about how the white garments here are “very similar to the

conquering believers” who received the white stone previously. Both are signs of membership in God’s family.²⁴

Curiously, there is a parallel with the thief language at the end of John’s Gospel that shows how Jesus can come in an unsuspecting way ... in grace. But the language is not of a Rapture. He tells Sardis, “If you do not watch, I will come to you ... and you will not know what hour I will come upon you.” After the resurrection we read in John, “But when the morning had come, Jesus stood upon the shore, but the *disciples did not know that it was Jesus*” (John 21:4).

He had appeared to them there in his resurrected body to show them kindness. This was possible because of two more parallels in John where Jesus himself takes upon himself the sinful Sardinian Christians’ curse. The overcomer may have white garments, because at his death, “They clothed him in a purple garment” (John 19:2) or mockery. He will not erase their name from the book of life because his name was written on a wooden cross by Pilate (John 19:21-22).

It is this Jesus, the one who holds the seven spirits of God, that is the Holy Spirit, and the one who holds the seven stars that we must always have as our purpose for meeting

²⁴ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 380–381.

and being a church. If we lose that, we drift into error of one kind or another, and Jesus will **hand us over** to that god of our own choosing. The results will be catastrophic. But if we will **remember** what we heard at the first, when salvation came to us, that this whole thing is about the Glory of God the Father through his sending the Son into our midst, then the Holy Spirit himself will come to us, forgive us, and bring us into an eternity of purity, and Jesus will not remember our sins, but will confess us before the Father and even the angels of heaven, perhaps itself a nod to the wandering stars themselves, whom he controls.

Of course, at this point I have to be talking **personally** and not corporately, for while Jesus can take away the candlestick of any church, no “church” is saved, except the invisible church, which is made up entirely of true believers in Christ, his elect throughout all the ages. And so to you I say **hear and respond** to this message to the church at Sardis the way its remnant did. Return quickly and often to the Lord and you will overcome and conquer at the end. He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.

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