

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 7 - Chapter 2 Conclusion

We will continue today in Revelation chapter 2 as we resume our discussion about the Believing assembly at Pergamum. Let's begin by re-reading that section of the chapter.

RE-READ REVELATION CHAPTER 2:12 – end

To sum up what we covered last time about Pergamum I'll start with the sharp-two edged sword emitting from the mouth of God. And, yes, to this point in Revelation I'm calling the divine being of the vision, the One who stands amidst the Menorahs, God and not Christ. I do this not because it is not most probably Christ, but because to this point neither God nor John has given us any more than a series of descriptions and characteristics of the divine being; but no name. And since these descriptions and characteristics are a mix of standard ones used in the Bible for God the Father along with ones used for His Son, Yeshua, it would be presumptuous of us, and would make us poor students, to jump to conclusions and to assign Him a name when none is given. And John didn't seem certain who this being was beyond the fact that He was the God of Israel.

The sharp two-edged sword is a much debated symbol although it is most usually accepted as meaning God's Word. In modern Christianity that Word is taken mostly to mean the New Testament. John could not have been thinking of the New Testament because it didn't exist yet, and wouldn't for over 100 years after his day. Two of the earliest Church Fathers, Victorinus and Jerome, took the double-edged sword to mean the Law of Moses as the one edge and the Gospel as the other. That is probably correct.

Then God tells the Believers of Pergamum that He knows they are living where the Adversary's (Satan's) throne is. This is another controversial statement because it is mostly speculation about what exactly God is indicating. Some think Satan's Throne is the formal name of a pagan altar in Pergamum. Others think it is but a nasty epithet that God is hurling at a horribly heathen city. What we can know for certain is that God considers Pergamum as a detestably wicked place. And yet even in the midst of Sodom when against all odds at least a few held onto God's name, so it was at Pergamum. When the persecutions against the Believers at Pergamum became so great that it actually led to the death of one of them (a fellow named Antipas), they didn't cower and renounce their allegiance to God as Peter had once done. For this God commends them. That's the good news; now for the bad.

Despite the good words God has for them He says He also has a few things against them. And the first thing on His list is that some of the Believers at Pergamum hold to the teaching of Bil'am, who helped Balak to set a trap for Israel so that they would sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. So the prohibition against eating food sacrificed to idols clearly goes back at least to the time of the Exodus, soon after the Law of Moses was enacted. Therefore the concept in Christianity that at the Jerusalem Conference

during Paul's day when gentile Believers were instructed not to eat food sacrificed to idols that this was a new commandment and unique to New Testament Christian gentiles is undone. The story of Bil'am and Barak appears in the Book of Numbers and is a few chapters long so we won't read it. However I think it can be summed up by the words that open Numbers chapter 25.

^{CJB} Numbers 25:1 *Isra'el stayed at Sheetim, and there the people began whoring with the women of Mo'av.*

² *These women invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, where the people ate and bowed down to their gods.*

³ *With Isra'el thus joined to Ba'al-P'or, the anger of ADONAI blazed up against Isra'el.*

So what is the connection between this passage in Numbers and what some Believers at Pergamum are doing that God condemns? They are teaching that a Believer can eat anything and the laws of sexual immorality don't apply to them. While it is true that the actual words read: "eat food that had been sacrificed to idols", adding this to the accusation of holding to the teaching of Bil'am indeed means eating like pagans eat.

I explained last week that it is necessary that we understand this from the Jewish mindset it is written or we'll miss the point. For a gentile Christian food typically means any edible thing. But for a Jew, and throughout the Bible, food means something different. It means only those things that God has declared are suitable as food for His worshippers. But even those things that God has declared in the Torah as permissible for food can become ritually unclean through several different means and therefore it is rendered inedible. One of those means to ruin otherwise permissible food is to sacrifice it to idols. Am I saying that all Believers, Jew and gentile, are required to follow the food laws as found in the Law of Moses? Are we to eat Kosher? Yes. The one caveat I would place on that is that we are to eat biblically kosher as compared to Rabbinic kosher. The food laws of the Bible are contained in a few paragraphs and are hardly difficult or very restrictive. About the worst of it for modern Western Christians is that we're not to eat pork or shellfish. But precious little else that we would even want to eat is prohibited for us in the Law of Moses. On the other hand the Jewish laws of kashrut created by the Rabbis are contained in their own separate volume in the Talmud and are complex and highly restrictive. We know that at least some of these Traditional Jewish laws about food were already well established by Christ's day because He got into more than one debate with Pharisees about them.

The bottom line is this: the teaching of Bil'am by some within the Pergamum congregation as it concerns food is exactly what the Church has been teaching for centuries: eat anything you want. And now in modern times we witness the rise of popularity and acceptance of homosexuality and trans-gender as great swaths of the Church have begun to teach that these biblical sexual prohibitions are also primitive and outdated and thus do not apply to modern Believers. Gay churches are now common, Gay ministers are ordained, Gay marriages are performed, and all restrictions against sex sin are being eroded. Tolerance for those identifying as part of the LGBTQ movement is taught from the pulpit in many denominations. The teaching

of Bil'am is alive and well within Christianity today just as it was in Pergamum in John's era.

In verse 15 God also tells Pergamum that there are those within their assembly who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Since this issue of the Nicolaitan influence was mentioned in the letter to Ephesus, clearly it was widespread at least in Asia. I won't repeat all that I had to say about the Nicolaitans concerning Ephesus. However I will have you recall that there is more than one view about who these people might have been. A relatively new view that might make the most sense of any of the views is that the word Nicolaitans comes from the Hebrew term ***nokhal***, which means "we will eat". In order to translate ***nokhal*** the Greeks invented a sound-alike word in ***nikolaton***, which centuries later led to the invention of the English sound-alike word Nicolaitan. If so, then it probably indicates another group of Believers who held to a teaching of having no food restrictions whatsoever. The difference between them and the teachers of Bil'am seems to be that the Nicolaitans didn't go so far as to overthrow the laws of sexual morality. I am inclined to accept this, and I don't think it is coincidence that the issue of verse 14 is eating food sacrificed to idols and in verse 15 it is the Nicolaitans who refused to accept any eating restrictions. God condemns them both and calls these behaviors "sin". He says that if those who practice these things continue God will make war against them.

The means God says He will use to wage war on the heretics is the sword of His mouth. It's a little hard to understand the sense of this until we remember the Bil'am and Balak story that was just referenced in verse 14. As he was on his way to help Balak curse God's people, Bil'am was confronted by a fearsome angel with a sword in his hand where he was told he was not to curse God's people; and some years later he was killed by a sword for his wickedness. And since I believe Victorinus and Jerome were correct to say that John's double-edged sword vision symbolized the Law and the Gospel, it fits that this sword is what God would use to judge and condemn to eternal damnation the teachers of Bil'am in Pergamum and the equally evil "we will eat" folks, the Nicolaitans.

All I can say from all this is that for those who believe that obedience to God's commandments is optional; and that Christians are free to eat anything we want to without consequence, notice what is being said in this letter and what God's attitude and threat is to the Believers of Pergamum. I've known a number of people who grudgingly began to eat biblically kosher because they had run out of reasons not to. They weren't entirely convinced or happy about it. But soon after starting to eat kosher they came to realize that the issue wasn't ever really about whether God has ordained what Believers are to eat and not eat and that He's serious about it. The issue was a personal stubbornness that simply couldn't accept the notion of anyone restricting them from foods they had always eaten and loved. The issue was, and remains, for most of us an issue of trust and obedience.

The closing of this letter is the same as each one; it contains an exhortation to hear and heed what the Lord is telling them. And for those who turn from the sins they have been accused of, there will be two rewards. The first reward is that they will eat from the hidden manna. We are all familiar with the manna (which literally means "what is it?") that rained from the sky for the entire time the Israelites were traveling on their exodus from Egypt. Manna is often characterized in the Bible and by Jewish Sages and Rabbis as the bread of life. And Christ, too, is said to be the metaphorical spiritual bread of life. Thus the visible manna is that which

miraculously fed the Israelites for 40 years, and the hidden manna is the Messiah Yeshua. The second reward is that the overcomer will receive a white stone with a new name on it. In John's era a white stone was the typical means of admission to an event or public festival. And, in a public trial, a white stone meant a vote of acquittal and a black stone was a vote of guilt by each jury member. Thus for a victorious Believer to receive a white stone with a new name written upon it (that is, overcoming his sins by repentance and changing his behavior) meant that the Believer is so thoroughly vindicated by his obedience and trust in God that his old identity will become a thing of the past and he or she will receive a new and pure identity. What a hope we have! What a future awaits us! But there is a downside. This hope and future is only for the Believer who corrects these sins; those who don't will NOT eat of the hidden manna nor will they receive the white stone. This doesn't mean that such a Believer only gets the partial benefits of salvation; it means they get none. It means their salvation has been repudiated.

Letter number 4 is to the Messianic Community of Thyatira. Thyatira, southeast of Pergamum, lays on the same main thoroughfare as do the other 6 congregations. We hear of Thyatira in Acts 16 as a stop on Paul's missionary tour. There he met and evangelized a woman who would become the first recorded person to accept Christ during that tour. Lydia, a seller of purple, was what Thyatira was famous for at that time. It was a small village, totally different than the magnificent cities and centers of learning that were Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum. And yet there, too, existed a Jewish population and so a synagogue; and now an established population of Believers.

The letter opens with God once again giving no name; only sticking with descriptions and characterizations. Here in verse 18 we will see the only mention of the term "Son of God" in the Book of Revelation. We have talked about this before yet it is too important to bypass. It is standard Christian thinking and theology to say that the term "Son of God" refers not only to Christ but also to His deity. Son of God, it is said, is what tells us that Yeshua is a divine human. However in reality that term is used in several instances in the Old Testament and it was applied to several Israelite kings. Over time it became understood that Son of God was primarily aimed at indicating a royal descendant of King David. A descendant who would become the new king of Israel; the Messiah. So that is exactly how we should take it to mean here. The message to open this letter is, then, from a king, a Davidic King. What we must grasp is this term refers to the human nature of the Messiah and has nothing to do with divinity. It refers to His power and His authority. But as has become typical in the Revelation letters, the description of the divine being doesn't end there. The next words are: whose eyes are like a fiery flame and whose feet are like burnished brass. Those are word for word descriptions of the Ancient One....the Father....that we find in Daniel and Ezekiel. So once again we have a description in the Son of Man that seems to nail it down that this divine being is Christ, and then the curve ball is thrown with a further description that has always been reserved for the Father. So the mystery continues.

This letter contains the most profound commendations and the most damning condemnations to exist among the 7. And it centers on the damage to the congregation that one particular person has perpetrated, and apparently that person has not been seriously challenged for some reason or another. The Lord says that this congregation's love, trust, service and

perseverance are not only good but they are doing even more good now than before. I want to point out that the only context we can take their service in is outbound ministry. Thus unlike Ephesus that lost the love they had at first, Thyatira has maintained it and grown it. A term that private businesses and the military uses is “mission creep”. It means that whatever the original mission was, over time it has morphed and changed into something else and happened generally imperceptibly as it was occurring. I think among Believers that situation most often manifests itself in a congregation becoming inward looking instead of outward into the local community. And yet, there is danger in being too anxious to be outward looking because suddenly the ministry can begin to import people who harbor a very different attitude, spiritual condition, and goal from the congregation and leadership. If allowed to, these newcomers can cause a great deal of tribulation, disruption, and worse....they can lead people away from the truth by offering trendy new thoughts that don't reflect Godly wisdom.

The person in Thyatira that is leading some in the congregation astray is called “that Jezebel woman”. And what is she teaching people to do? She is teaching them to commit sexual sins and to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols. Anyone catching a repetitive theme in these letters? Sex sin and food issues seem to be rampant and also at the top of God's list of things He hates. By comparing this unnamed woman to Jezebel (who was the wife of wicked King Ahab), the charge then is that she is a supporter of idolatry, paganism, and everything that is anti-God. Jezebel's goal was to rid Israel of God worship and she was well on her way to doing it. We must assume that this Jezebel woman's goal was similar or she herself was deceived.

The watchword of the 21st century is tolerance. Tolerance is today hailed as the greatest virtue a society or an individual can hold. Anyone or any nation labeled as intolerant is seen as an enemy of humanity and of progress into an enlightened age. Not surprisingly, tolerance has crept into Christian institutions as an important virtue as well. Very recently I visited a Christian college where a statement of welcome, tolerance and acceptance for people of all sexual orientations was prominently placed by the entry doors. Tolerance of itself is not an evil thing; it is what we tolerate that matters. I'm sad to say that in contemporary times essentially the counter argument to all biblical morality is tolerance. To speak against homosexuality is intolerance. To be against abortion on demand is intolerance. To refuse to allow those practicing adultery to remain in the congregation is intolerance. In fact, to accuse anyone of evil is intolerance. The otherwise good people of Thyatira were tolerating a malicious cancer in their midst apparently because they thought they should; and it has caused God to react by issuing a stern warning and threat against not just the perpetrator but the entire assembly.

So how did this Jezebel woman wind up getting such influence in this congregation? It was primarily that she claimed to be a prophetess. A person claiming prophetic knowledge has always been a magnetic draw for God's people. By New Testament times the term prophet had evolved a little. For a worshipper of God who held fast to the Bible it more meant a teacher of God's Word because in general it was believed among Jews that the era of the Prophets was over and any communication from God was contained in the Scriptures. However there were those (and will always be those) who honestly think that they are prophets along the lines of Daniel and Ezekiel; people who believe that God regularly shows them the future or gives them special knowledge. It has been a very long time since I've spoken on this so I'll detour

here for a just a moment.

The biblical test for a self-proclaimed Prophet is that they can never be wrong. If they claim that God told them thus and so and it doesn't happen, they are a false prophet; there are no second chances. This must always be our test as well. Nothing they say from a prophetic nature should be taken seriously if ever they are wrong, or they try to sell us on something that is not tangible and provable. I can't tell you how many folks send me emails, letters, and occasionally tell me something in person that "the Lord told them to tell me". The common preamble to the prophecy is: "I have a word from the Lord for you". So I'll say now what I said to this congregation years ago; think twice about approaching me like that because I'm not likely to believe you. If the Lord has something He wants to reveal to me, He'll reveal it to me. He won't be using a self professed prophet as an intermediary. This of course is not the same thing as wise and godly council, which we all should be open to.

Leading up to my intolerant declaration I had so many "prophets" telling me what was going to happen about any number of things, I'm not sure I can recall any of it ever happening. But that didn't seem to ever deter these folks because they sincerely thought they were doing good. They kept on making prophecies, and kept on being wrong. And many of them had followers who went around telling others about what so and so prophesied because it sounded so lofty or exciting. The Bible says that so serious is the charge for claiming to be a prophet, but its not true, is that these false prophets are to be stoned to death. True Prophets are anointed by God, they are rare, and they are accepted by the religious leadership and the people as Prophets. And, they prove to be correct. Even more, Prophets seldom wanted to be Prophets. In a short time those who didn't fight against the appointment too hard at first tried everything to get out of it later. It was a tough job; most Prophets eventually became hated, lost their families and friends, were run out of towns and villages, and lived much of their lives alone and in poverty. Not because their prophecies didn't come to pass; but because they did. And these prophecies were rarely a bucketful of good news.

So this Jezebel woman, a false prophet, had duped plenty of people in this congregation, including the leadership. The gist of her teaching was to deny the Word of God and to deceive people into believing that God personally gave her new laws and commands that apparently in many ways countermanded the old laws and commands. And the two most serious in God's eyes were her advocating eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual sin. Let's understand something: at least partly due to Paul's teaching, most Believers didn't believe that these idols were any more than inanimate pieces of wood and stone. They had no power, and there was no god behind them. Paul teaches in 1Corinthians 8: ⁴ ***So, as for eating food sacrificed to idols, we "know" that, as you say, "An idol has no real existence in the world, and there is only one God."*** (1 Cor. 8:4 CJB)

So Paul's teaching is that food laid on the altar of an idol doesn't change one bit. Nothing supernatural happens to it that would either give you power or make you sick. But it is also the same for food (permissible food) in general that is NOT offered to an idol. There is nothing magical about food that is kosher versus food that is not. People have for generations come up with all kinds of reasons for eating kosher that include claims of longer life spans, or that certain non-kosher meats are essentially slow acting poison to our systems, or that eating

kosher is God's health plan. None of this proves out. So then why eat biblically kosher? It comes down to only one thing: trust and obedience. We follow the biblical eating plan because, as Believers, we trust God and we obey Him; it is not to gain a physical benefit. And, to a degree, eating as God has ordained sets us apart from others who eat anything that pleases them. We eat as God says because it pleases HIM!

Verse 21 says that this woman was given time to repent and stop this sinning but she consciously decided that she did not want to. Apparently someone in the congregation had the guts to confront her and tell her what she was doing was evil; thus she wasn't naïve in her behavior. But the leadership didn't have the similar guts to put her out in order to save the other Believers (those Believers whom she was infecting with lies). Why wouldn't the leadership act? Probably the age-old reason: the woman was popular, had a following, and the leadership didn't want to rock the boat. They also likely confused love with tolerance.

Verse 22 is what God is going to do because the congregation leadership did nothing. First, for the woman herself, God is going to make her very ill (presumably with a fatal disease). Second, for those in the congregation who are her followers they will receive great troubles. And third, God will strike her children dead. Those of the congregation who follow her are called adulterers because a Believer cannot be in union with God and with evil at the same time. Adultery is essentially breaking faith in what was vowed to be a monogamous relationship. However there is a level of hope for this group of Believers because while they follow her, they are not so far gone that they cannot be brought to their senses. As Yeshua's brother James counsels: ¹⁹ ***My brothers, if one of you wanders from the truth, and someone causes him to return,*** ²⁰ ***you should know that whoever turns a sinner from his wandering path will save him from death and cover many sins. (Jas. 5:19-20 CJB)***

The woman's children is not referring to her actual biological offspring (although it could include some of them), but rather it is those of the congregation who have been trained by her and are fully committed with the ways she has taught them. They have no hope; their fate...eternal death...is already sealed. Let me say one more time: this is God dealing with Believers not with pagans.

This seems to be terribly harsh; but God is good to tell us exactly why He's being so severe with this woman and her followers. At the end of verse 23, God says: ***Then all the Messianic communities will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and that I will give to each of you what your deeds deserve. (Rev. 2:23 CJB)*** This is an attribute of God that we hear about all throughout the Old Testament. He will dispose of many evil people for the sake of protecting the remainder of His people who have not yet fallen. And the hope is also that people far and wide will fear God when they hear about what He did and that this fear will keep them from doing the same even if they have an inclination to do so.

Back to some good news: God says that He recognizes that not every Believer in Thyatira has accepted the teachings of the Jezebel woman, and have not adhered to something called the "deeper teachings" of the Adversary, so for them God says He'll apply no further burden and if they can just hang on to what they know is truth until He comes, they'll be fine. It's not agreed among Bible commentators what the deeper teachings of the Adversary (or Satan)

means. I think, however, that considering that it was the Gnostic philosophers that had great influence at this time, and we know from other documents that the Gnostics were a constant thorn in the side of Believing congregations, that likely these deeper things were indeed based on Gnostic philosophies. Gnosticism invariably touts the human intellect as supreme and so intelligent people are said to gain greater spiritual understanding than ordinary people.

So what is this about placing no further burden on the Believers who have held fast to the truth and have not been seduced by the Jezebel woman and her false teachings? Apparently these Believers were suffering significantly and under constant strain because of their faith and their determination to continue in the truth. Thus whatever misgivings the Lord might have had with Thyatira, the huge upheaval they were about to endure when they ejected this woman and her followers was enough. This congregation is about to be torn apart and matters like this don't resolve themselves very quickly. But this upheaval is a necessity for the spiritual survival of the still faithful.

The ending of this letter is a little different than the others; God has much more to say. He says that for those of Thyatira who remain steadfast, they will rule with Him during the next age. Verse 27 is taken from Psalm 2. Turn your Bibles to Psalm 2.

READ PSALM 2 all

This is recognized by Jews and Christians as a Messianic Psalm. In Christianity the belief is that this is speaking about a time that we call the 1000 year reign of Christ (I agree with that). This Psalm could not be more appropriate in the context of Revelation 2 because it talks about anti-leaders conspiring against God's chosen leaders. About people wanting to break the fetters and throw off the chains of those who demand that all people live in accordance with God's laws and commands. Is that not exactly what this Jezebel woman was trying to do?

And Revelation chapter 2 finishes up with the divine being saying that just as He has received authority from His father, he will also give His Father the morning star. From a purely worldly standpoint the morning star visible in the sky is the planet Venus. But here the meaning is less clear. In Revelation 22:16, Yeshua identifies Himself as the morning star but says it in the context of being the Messiah reigning over God's Kingdom on earth. So without other evidence or a strong alternative other than allegory I think it best to accept that meaning here to end chapter 2.

We'll begin chapter 3 and the Messianic congregation at Sardis next time.