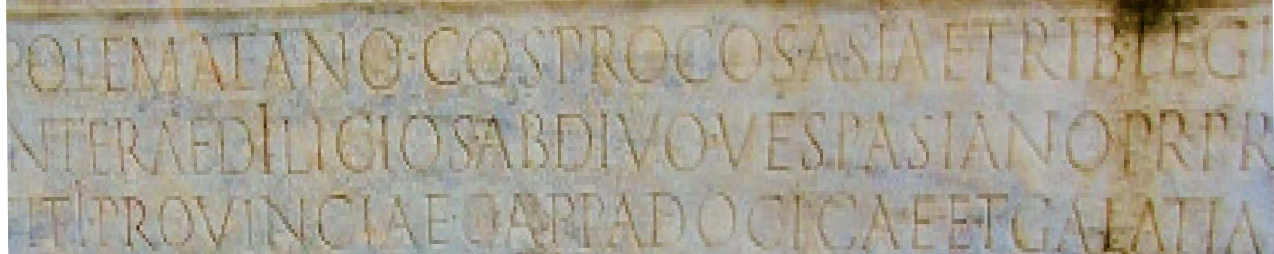




FOUNDATIONS

Lessons in Discipleship
from the New Testament Church



Study Guide



CENTER FOR
HOLY LANDS STUDIES

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Pergamum The Church Caught on the Edge

Bible Text: Revelation 2:12-17

Do you tend to focus more on your failures rather than your accomplishments? When looking back on our failures, we may be upset or even depressed, knowing we can see where things went wrong and now understand the consequences. When we look at the Bible, we are often drawn to examples of victory, like David and Goliath, far more than moments of defeat, such as David and Absalom. Victorious stories bring hope!

What if we look at the lessons, both positive and negative, as examples of equal importance? An excellent example of a positive and negative example is found in one of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation to the church of Pergamum. In this church, we see the reality of a church that appeared so alive for the cause of the gospel, yet lived lives based on false teachings and sin.

WATCH THE CHURCH CAUGHT ON THE EDGE VIDEO



In the final days of the New Testament period, not every church was under the threat of constant persecution. Some churches like that of Colossae were in small cities where their presence was relatively unknown to higher powers. Others, like the church of Laodicea, were too passive about their faith to greatly impact the city as a whole. Yet, in Pergamum, to be a faithful witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ in the final days of the first century could cost the price of an individual's life as seen in their letter from Christ in Revelation 2. We see that even after having members forced to give up their lives, the church in Pergamum received some condemnation from Christ for their false teachers in the church. We may consider: How were they supposed to know the difference between godly leaders and the leaders in the church who were now leading them astray?

The answer is simpler than we may think. It is all about knowing and

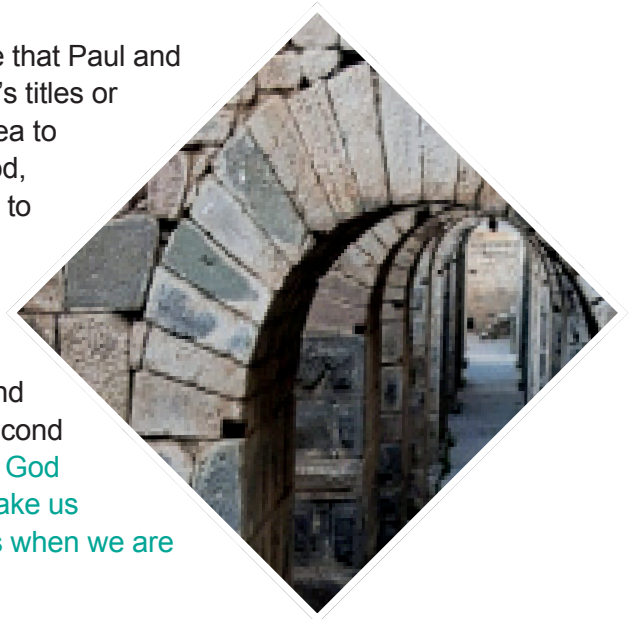
identifying sound doctrine. Although their hearts were in the right place, their minds were not. The New Testament tells us that teachers are given to the church by Christ himself, as Paul stated, “Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). There remains a responsibility on our part to know God’s Word and to test all that is taught to us. Christ warned us while here on earth, “False messiahs and false prophets will rise up and perform great signs and wonders so as to deceive, if possible, even God’s chosen ones” (Matthew 24:24).

We must be active and diligent in our personal study of God’s word so that we will know it and be able to test any teacher to see if what they say or preach is from the Holy Spirit. Even Paul, God’s chosen missionary apostle, experienced this reaction from righteous followers of the Word in the city of Berea while he was ministering to them. Acts 17:11 tells us, “And the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they listened eagerly to Paul’s message. They searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.”

We understand that God inspired the message that Paul and Silas had for these people. Yet, Paul and Silas’s titles or fame were not enough for the believers of Berea to choose to follow them. Instead, the word of God, Scripture itself, was the basis for their decision to continue to allow these missionaries to speak into their lives.

One of the essential foundations to any church’s biblical understanding is the reality, and true power and usefulness of the Scripture. Second Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.”

Scripture shows us when we are doing things right, the way God intended, or when we are missing the mark from what God desires us to be. We can understand a little more about why the author of Hebrews refers to God’s Word as being like a “double-edged sword” (4:12). It can be used to vindicate us or point out our shortcomings, to show us the truth from fallacy, and most importantly, to show us sin from righteousness.



For the church of Pergamum, it would seem that they were unquestionably familiar with Scripture, as Christ used the example of Balaam, the prophet from Numbers 22. It would seem that although the church was familiar with the person Balaam, they lacked familiarity with his teachings. Teachings that the children of God were expressly forbidden to participate in. Their lack of understanding of the teachings of Scripture allowed false teachers, the Nicolaitans, to encourage the members of the church in Pergamum to mix pagan practices, such as sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to Idols (Revelation 2:14), into their worship of God. Had the church been intimately familiar with scripture, they could have been like the church of Ephesus. Christ noted that the church in Ephesus identified and tested false teachers, driving them out and despising their teachings (Revelation 2:2, 6).

Had the members of the church of Pergamum searched the Scriptures and known them as well as Christ desired, they could have avoided and driven out false teachers when they initially came into the church.

Today, we have the example of the Pergamum church and those who went before them. We can learn from them so that we do not make the same mistakes. By focusing on both the victories and the failures of the Pergamum church, we are able to wrestle with some of the hard questions. We have been given the gift of history, both the good and bad, to have the wisdom to build a firm foundation against the attacks of the enemy and the attacks of our world.



