

Revelation 2:12-17

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[0 : 00] if I could put it that way, that they got all their doctrine right, they cared about truth, they got rid of all the false teachers, but at the end of the day, they didn't have any love. They didn't have any passion or concern or care for each other.

And last week, we looked at the letter to the church at Smyrna, and there we saw basically a church that was in need of hope. And John Dunlop led us through that letter, showing us how there were all these great encouragements and hope in that letter. They were about to undergo persecution, and Jesus met them with deep comfort. And tonight, we come to the third letter, the letter to the church in Pergamum. And that is page 1029 in the Pew Bible. If you want to turn there, I think it's going to be on the screens above as well, so you can follow along there. But let me encourage you to open up a Bible and follow along if you can. So, Revelation chapter 2, starting in verse 12, and I'll read the whole way through to verse 17.

Jesus says this, And to the angel of the church in Pergamum, write, The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword, 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. 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, sacrifice to idols, and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore, repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with a sword in my mouth. 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. Well, so how would we summarize, how would we summarize Jesus' diagnosis of the church in Pergamum? Well, on the one hand, in verse 13, we see that they're holding fast in the face of persecution. Jesus says, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Now, that's probably referring to the fact that the city of Pergamum possessed one of the oldest temples in Asia Minor, that's modern-day Turkey, one of the oldest temples in that region devoted to the worship of the emperor. Pergamum was located about 100 miles north of the city of Ephesus, and it was just home to just all sorts of temples and idol worship.

One of these temples, this one that was dedicated to emperor worship, was dedicated to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma. Another temple was dedicated to the god Asclepius, the god of healing, who was represented often with images of serpents and snakes. The city also had a huge altar to Zeus.

So, you get the picture that it was a city full of idolatry and pagan worship. And in this city in particular, it would seem that the worship of the emperor as a god wasn't just sort of emphasized or a part of the culture, but it was actually beginning to be required or demanded or mandated of some of the citizens. Now, of course, that caused massive problems for the Christians in Pergamum in this city, because obviously, they had one king, and his name was Jesus, and they weren't going to bow and worship to any other god. So, they were under threat of slander and imprisonment, violence, even death.

[3 : 52] But in light of all that, Jesus commends the church by saying, you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith. My faith there is another way of just sort of saying the faith that you have in me. So, in the midst of the persecution, this church, these Christians are holding fast.

And it's very interesting, the word hold fast there that's described of their holding fast is the same word that's used of Jesus back in verse 1 of chapter 2 for the way in which Jesus holds fast the stars of the seven churches. They have this Christ-like grip on Christ himself, and they're not letting go. And even when this persecution led to actual martyrdom, they still didn't deny their faith in

Jesus, their allegiance to him. Jesus reminds them of a man named Antipas, one of their fellow Christians who was actually killed in one of these rounds of persecution. It's very interesting, Jesus honors this man with a special title. He calls him my faithful witness. And if you remember back in chapter 1 verse 5, that's actually one of the ways in which Jesus himself is described as the faithful witness. So, Jesus is honoring Antipas, and he's honoring this church by giving them a name that he himself bears, my faithful witness. So, it seems as Jesus diagnoses this church's spiritual health, we find that he's commending them for bearing persecution well. Like Jesus, they're holding fast. Like Jesus, they are a faithful witness. But that's not the full diagnosis. So, in verses 14 and 15, we learn that though this church is holding fast in the midst of persecution, they're failing to reject the false teachers who are in their midst. Now, these false teachers here are described in two ways, and it seems like there might have actually been two separate groups. First, Jesus says, 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. Now, the story of Balaam and Balak is from the book of Numbers, if you remember that. Israel in that story is wandering in the wilderness, and Balak, the king of Moab, hires the prophet Balaam to come out and to curse Israel. And what happens? God actually prevents Balaam from cursing Israel. But as we read the rest of the story, we learn that Balaam later advises the king of Moab to seduce the Israelites into both sexual and spiritual infidelity to their God.

And if you go back and look at Numbers 25, 1 through 4, you see that Israel was indeed led astray, and God's judgment came down on the people. And Jesus is saying to the church in Pergamum, there are false teachers in your midst who are just like Balaam from the Old Testament.

[7 : 03] You as a church, after all, are going through this wilderness experience of persecution, and there are false teachers there trying to seduce you down destructive paths. They may not be cursing you outright, but they're inducing you to slide away from your singular devotion to the Lord.

And the second way Jesus describes these false teachers, or the second group that he points out is there in verse 15, you also, so also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Now, we met this brand of false teacher before in the letter to the church of Ephesus, if you remember that back in verse 6 of this chapter. And as Jonathan so deftly described when he preached on that letter, we have no idea who the Nicolaitans actually were, other than just sort of some heretical sect within the early church. We don't really have a lot of historical detail about them. We can assume that maybe they held some similar views to these Balaam-like false teachers that we just looked at. That is, they might have been leading people into idolatry or some form of impure actions. But it's very interesting that whatever it was that they taught, Jesus says in verse 6, back in that letter to the church in Ephesus, that he actually hates their works. Very strong language.

Gives us a little hint at how spiritually deadly Jesus actually considered them to the health and to the life of this body of believers. Okay, so this is the picture that we get of the church in Pergamum.

[8 : 33] They're holding fast to the faith in the midst of intense persecution, but at the same time, they're allowing false teachers to sort of work and operate in their midst. They're facing a hostile world outside, and they're strong, and they endure. Some have even laid down their life for the faith, but inside, it seems they're letting their guard down, and they're not being diligent to protect sound doctrine. And it's leading them down dangerous paths.

Now, let's do a little sort of historical imagination here. Put yourself in the shoes of the Christians at Pergamum. What do you think might have contributed to them getting to that particular spiritual state? You know, maybe sort of facing intense persecution on the outside, you know, maybe they started to think that holding to sound doctrine wasn't really as important as having solidarity with people, right? When the social pressure started kicking in, perhaps they felt like anyone who shared anything in common with them was worthy to have in the church because there would be some power in numbers. Maybe they were even afraid of what would happen if they thinned out their numbers by sort of getting rid of these false teachers. Or perhaps they figured that, you know, in times like these, it's sort of not time to split hairs over doctrine. Let's just bunker down and hold out. You know, we see this sometimes in the church today, don't we? That often we'll overlook really important doctrinal differences just so long as we care about the same social issues as another group.

You know, sometimes evangelicals are quick to note how much they have in common with certain other groups, let's just say Mormons, for example, in terms of their sort of family values or other sort of moral issues, you know. And they seem to have found in those groups a sort of ally in the midst

of social pressures. But, you know, what a lot of times they don't realize is that a lot of these groups, like Mormonism, for example, utterly deny essential, non-negotiable doctrines of Christianity, like the nature of the person of Christ or the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation.

Now, that's not to say that today Christians can't ever work with Mormons or other groups to promote a more just society. That's not what I'm saying. But, I think this letter at the Church of Pergamum would be a warning to us that we shouldn't just run out and wholeheartedly endorse other groups as legitimate expressions of the true faith in the one God just because we happen to find ourselves on the same side of a particular issue. So, thinking about Pergamum then, maybe in facing this persecution, maybe in holding fast under suffering, maybe they sort of downgraded the importance of doctrine in place of just finding some solidarity in the midst of pressure. Or maybe, maybe the thing that could have led to this spiritual state for them was thinking that because they had suffered so much, they didn't need to be as diligent about such things as purity of doctrine and purity of life.

[11:57] You know, this can sort of show up as a sort of victim mentality, right? It would run something like this, you know, I've suffered so much in this area. I've suffered so much here that I really shouldn't have to work so hard here. Surely, God will understand if I give in to this or if I tolerate that. After all, look at all that I've been through. Look at all that we've been through. Don't we deserve to take a break, to let our guard down, to enjoy myself given all these troubles that I've seen?

In other words, maybe they were sort of excusing the harboring of false teachers out of a sort of victim mentality. Or maybe a third option, maybe in the teeth of persecution, in the sort of grip of that pressure, maybe they just weren't thinking about it at all, which is quite possible. Maybe just in survival mode, they had let their guard down and just drifted. Maybe it wasn't conscious at all. Maybe it just happened over time. Well, friends, I wonder, do you see any of these tendencies in your own heart when you undergo any kind of suffering or hardship or trial, when you're holding fast to the faith in an unfriendly context or in an unfriendly sort of season of life?

Do you see that same tendency maybe to just sort of downplay sound doctrine, to see it maybe not quite as important? Or maybe you sort of use that hard experience as an excuse for yourself from sort of sticking with it or from caring about some of these issues? Or maybe as you look at your heart, maybe you've been through a hard season lately and maybe you just see that you've been kind of drifting away through a lack of just attention or diligence.

Well, however it happens and however we find it showing up in our own hearts and our own lives, Jesus is very clear in this letter, isn't he? That this is a deadly situation for this church to be in.

[14:08] And they need to operate immediately. Even with all they've been through, even though they've suffered much, even though church members have even been killed for their faithful witness, Jesus doesn't let them excuse or ignore the false teaching in their midst.

He doesn't let them succumb to a victim mentality. He actually loves them too much to allow them to do that. He sees in this church that he loves a cancer that has to be removed. After all, what good is a church that perseveres under persecution outside if on the inside they end up losing the truth of the gospel itself and being led down paths of lives of disobedience to God?

At the beginning of the letter, Jesus reminded them that he is the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. Now, like the opening of all of the seven letters, that points back to a description of Jesus that we saw in chapter 1, right?

In verse 16 of chapter 1, John saw in his vision of Jesus that out of this sort of vision that he had of Jesus in glory, out of Jesus' mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.

And we said a few weeks ago that that was symbolic of Jesus' powerful word, a picture of his powerful word that searches hearts and that issues judgment.

[15:50] You know, this isn't the only time that the word of God, that the word of Christ is described like a sword in the Bible, right? There's that great passage from Hebrews 4, verses 12 through 13, actually sort of an uncomfortable passage.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And then the writer of the Hebrews goes on, And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.

In Ephesians 6, 17, Paul calls the word of God the sword of the spirit. There are a much more sort of positive picture of the word of God as a sword, something that helps us in our spiritual battles of

prayer and of faithfulness.

And as the New Testament is picking up this motif, it's actually one that we find in the Old Testament as well. In Isaiah 49, verse 2, there Isaiah is sort of speaking in the voice of the servant of the Lord, that figure who runs through that middle section of the book of Isaiah, such an important figure that we know ultimately is fulfilled in Christ.

And there the servant of the Lord says, The Lord made my mouth like a sharp sword. And finally again, near the end of Revelation, in Revelation 19, verse 5, John will again see Jesus, this time returning in glory, and he will say, From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.

[17:21] So Jesus here is reminding this church that he loves at Pergamum, this church that he has commended for their faithful perseverance, he's reminding them of his swift, decisive word that discerns thoughts and hearts, that will one day put an end to evil and injustice and rebellion in the world.

His word that will one day make all things new, is reminding them of his word that is powerful, that is effectual.

It's as if Jesus is reminding them how important truth and sound doctrine really are. And he's reminding them that he will divide the true from the false in his church, and that they must too, actually.

They must be discerning. And in light of that, Jesus is telling them in this letter, in verse 16, to repent.

Look at verse 16. Therefore, repent, Jesus says. If not, I will come to you soon, and war against them with the sword of my mouth. Now, what does the word repent mean?

[18:45] The word repent means to change course, to admit that you're on the wrong path, and to turn around, and to ask for help, and to cry out, and to then get on the right path.

Often times, we think that repentance is sort of just trying our best, and doing the best we can. But no, repentance is actually sort of a fundamental shift. And that's what Jesus is calling for.

That's what he's inviting them into. That's what he's sort of demanding that they do. And for the Christians in Pergamum, this would mostly look like removing the false teachers from their community.

And otherwise, Jesus says that he'll come soon, and war against the false teachers himself. Very strong language there. And presumably, that Jesus will sort of find in that removal, those who didn't oppose the false teachers will fall under the same sort of condemnation.

So it's a threat. It's a warning. You know, it's very interesting, as Jesus issues this call to repentance, and also offers them this stern warning.

[20:03] I find it very interesting, by way of observation, that Jesus doesn't refrain from telling a suffering church to repent.

Isn't that interesting? You wonder whether Jesus would have passed pastoral care when he went to seminary, telling this suffering, hurting church, no, you need to repent.

Isn't that fascinating? I was just struck by that this week. You know, he's not candy coating things for them. He's not wearing kid gloves with them. In other words, their suffering doesn't release them from their moral responsibility or their moral dignity.

Of course, Jesus isn't being cold or insensitive. He's being loving and caring. He cares deeply for them. He experiences their suffering along with them. And yet, by telling this church to repent, isn't Jesus actually restoring some of their agency and some of their dignity as his people?

You know, it's often the case that when individuals or when communities suffer, when they experience that kind of persecution, they feel as if their agency and their dignity is lost, that there's nothing they can do, that they've been stripped of their ability to act.

[21:22] And here Jesus is saying, no, that's not true of you, not of my people. No, you can come. You have a role to play in this. You know, that's why I think for us personally, as we look at our own hearts, even in times of suffering, even in times of hardship, we should be practicing the discipline of repentance from sin.

And for nothing else, a way of maintaining our dignity and agency and moral responsibility in addition to drawing near to God. But there's no doubt that what Jesus is telling this church in Pergamum to do and telling us to do sort of by way of analogy, if we were in their position, what Jesus is telling them to do here is not easy.

It's not easy to sort of do the hard thing. But he offers this great promise for those who respond faithfully.

First, he says, to the one who conquers or to the one who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna.

Now, hidden manna here probably alludes to the manna that was preserved in the Holy of Holies inside the ark in the tabernacle. In other words, Jesus is promising to nourish the faithful saints with an unending supply of heavenly spiritual food.

[23 : 02] A sort of spiritual food and satisfaction that comes from the very center of the Holy of Holies itself. And what was the Holy of Holies?

It was the representation of the presence of God's throne in the midst of the earth. It was where heaven and earth connected in Old Covenant symbolism.

And Jesus is saying, come, come to me and let me open up that for you. I'll give you some of that hidden manna to nourish you. And then he promises them, and I will give to the one who overcomes a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Now, historically, a white stone, white stones were given to victors, to champions at athletic games as sort of an entrance, an entrance sort of token as a card, into sort of the victors' banquets.

And very interesting that the city of Pergamum, in the city of Pergamum itself, white marble was actually very valuable because it was incredibly rare.

[24 : 18] Most of the local geography around Pergamum was dominated by pink granite, so the historians tell us. So most of their homes and most of their buildings were made out of this pink granite.

But white marble was very hard to come by and very valuable. And Jesus is telling them here that he's going to give them a costly, valuable, personal access to his banquet, to his feast.

Just like those victorious athletes would get their entrance to the joy of the party for the victor's circle, so these Christians at Pergamum would be welcomed and honored and given a place to sit and dine at the greatest banquet of all time.

And interesting, Jesus even adds there that their welcome would be intimate and personal. He says a new name is going to be written on each one of these stones, a name that no one else knows, almost this secret name shared intimately, personally between the faithful Christian and their God. What a stunning picture that Jesus is building up then for these beleaguered Christians of being, what?

[25 : 43] Of being known, of being personally invited, of being lavishly fed with the soul-satisfying bread of heaven, to be known and to be fed by God himself.

You see, I think Jesus knows that they have a longing in the midst of their suffering to be known and protected and welcomed and fed.

Don't you have that longing too when you experience hardship that someone would know you and that someone would welcome you and that someone would surround you and that someone would dignify you? And they're holding fast in the midst of that and it's not easy to do.

And you know, some of these false teachers may have come along offering empty promises of belonging and of pleasure, but Jesus tells them, no, no, no.

I'll tell you where true belonging and true satisfaction are found. They're found in me. They're found in him. Do you notice here that Jesus says that he will give them the hidden manna and that he will give them the white stone with the new name?

[27 : 00] Consider, friends, what gives Jesus the right to offer such gifts. How does he have the authority to grant such intimate access to God?

No one else was allowed to go into the holy places and touch that stuff other than the highest of high priests. And Jesus is saying, oh, I'll open up those doors and let you feast. What gives Jesus that right?

Is it not ultimately because of his work on the cross? As John will see in chapter 5, just a few chapters later, this one with the sword coming out of his mouth is also the lamb who was slain.

You see, friends, Jesus died in our place and rose again in order to grant us these amazing promises.

So, friends, tonight, if you see yourself in this description of the church of Pergamum, listen to the words. Listen to the words of the living Lord Jesus. If you've experienced suffering and trial, if you're

holding fast, if you see moral compromise and false doctrine creeping in, hear the words of Jesus, this invitation to turn, to repent, to come back.

[28 : 28] It's not too late. Turn to the one who offers you such promises, who has the right to offer you these promises. Listen to his word.

This reward that he holds out to you and me, friends, is lavish. To be known intimately. To be fed lavishly.

Friends, go to him tonight. Go to him tonight and find the forgiveness and the comfort and the strength that you need. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we do ask that like this faithful church, like these sisters and brothers of ours so long ago, we ask that we will be able to hold fast in the midst of hardship.

Lord, we also want to pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who are experiencing much more violent and fierce persecution than we are here. Lord, we know even this week Lord, many Christians will be hurt and harmed and perhaps even killed.

[29 : 42] Lord, we pray that out of your deep love for your church you would sustain your saints and be near them in their suffering. And Lord, we pray that we, even in the midst of our trials, would be able to turn away from false teaching, from doctrines that don't lead to our flourishing and our health, God, and help us to hear your promise once again.

Lord, help us to believe that with you there is a rich feeding and a rich knowledge being known like nothing else. Amen. Amen.