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Series: *Body-Building Lessons from the Seven Churches*

Title: *Pergamum*

Text: Revelation 2:12-17

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How many of you have ever had a stress test? Most of us older people have. But for you young people---here's how it works. The cardiologist hooks you up with a couple dozen sensors on your chest and then he puts you on a treadmill. At first you walk on a flat level---but as the test proceeds---he raises the level so you are walking uphill---higher and higher. Plus---as it gets steeper the belt goes faster so that you can't walk, you have to run uphill. And they make you go through that stressful exercise as long as you can take it. The purpose of the test is to see how healthy your heart is. I guess if you don't get a heart attack and die in the midst of the test---your heart is good to go.

The reason I bring this up is because in the letter Jesus wrote to the third church in the book of Revelation---reads like a "stress test" report of sorts. I mean, Jesus looked at this local congregation as he walked in their midst and then---based on what He saw as the church proceeded on the "treadmill of ministry," He shared the results. He told them what they needed to do to get the HEART of that body of Christ back into shape so that the church would be strong and productive. He even told them how they would benefit if they changed their behavior---like a cardiologist who will tell you things YOU can do after your stress test to make your heart healthier---"*Eat more vegetables*" "*Lose some weight*" "*Get more exercise.*"

Take your Bibles and turn to Revelation chapter 2 and let's review the results of this "*church stress test*" seen in the letter the Great Physician wrote them. It's in verses 12-17 and it's written to the church in Pergamum. Stand if able and follow along as I read.

Revelation 2:12-17

12 – *"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of Him Who has the sharp, double-edged sword.*

13 – *I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to My name. You did not renounce your faith in Me, even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.*

14 – *Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.*

15 – *Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*

16 – *Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight 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 him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.*

Before we go any further in our study---let me give you a little background on the city of Pergamum. As you can see from our map, it's located about 50 miles north of the last church we studied---the one in Smyrna---and it would have been the THIRD stop that a first century postman would have made in delivering mail to these seven churches of Asia---starting in Patmos going by ship to Ephesus---then Ephesus to Smyrna---and from Smyrna, on to Pergamum---the ROMAN CAPITOL of the entire province of Asia.

In fact, Pergamum had been a capital city long before the Romans made it one---going back 400 years to when it became the capitol of the Seleucid empire. So, these citizens and their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, and great, great grandparents, etc. ---well, let's just say they were used to being "where the action was." They were accustomed to having a lot of important things going on in their city. I imagine they felt much like we do living here on the outskirts of OUR nation's capital---minus the beltway of course!

Pergamum wasn't a port like Ephesus and Smyrna---so it wasn't a major trade city. But it more than made up for that deficiency because it was known all over the world as a center of CULTURE. And its greatest cultural asset was its

LIBRARY. They had one that contained over 200,000 scrolls. The only bigger library in the world at that time was the one in Alexandria.

By the way, the name “*Pergamum*” literally means “*parchment*” and there is a very interesting story related to this fact—a story that helps us understand how it got that name. For many centuries if you wanted to write something down—well, you used PAPYRUS—and papyrus was made from bulrushes that grow on the banks of the Nile. So, for a LONG TIME one of Egypt’s main exports was papyrus. It was in great demand all over the world, because if you lived back then, this is what you would use to write your grocery list on and your term papers. I suppose even sermons were written on papyrus!

Well, in the 3rd century B.C. the king of Pergamum was a guy named Eumenes and like his fellow “Pergamumites” Eumenes was very proud of his city—ESPECIALLY its library. But like all sinners—Eumenes wanted more. And what he wanted most was for his library to move from being the number two library in the world up to the number one slot. So he persuaded—or more accurately BRIBED—the man in charge of the library in Alexandria, a skilled librarian named Aristophanes—Eumenes got him to agree to leave and come to work for him in Pergamum.

Well, the ruler in Egypt at that time was Ptolemy and when he got word of what was going on it really ticked him off—so he put Aristophanes under lock and key. On top of that—to punish Eumenes for attempting to steal his librarian, Ptolemy put a sanction in place on the export of papyrus to Pergamum—sort of a “*no more bulrushes for you, Eumenes*” kind of deal.

Necessity is the mother of invention—so the scholars in Pergamum put their heads together to find a substitute for papyrus. And the result of their labors was parchment or vellum, which is made from the skins of animals. Parchment proved to be a far superior writing material and it eventually wiped out the papyrus market—which of course backfired on Ptolemy!

In any case this story showed that Pergamum was indeed a cultural center in that it was filled with some of the greatest academic minds of that day and age.

But, here’s another thing you need to know.

Like the other cities we’ve studied Pergamum was big on PAGAN IDOL WORSHIP. In fact, this city proudly boasted of having four great temples—one for each of the greatest gods of the Greeks. They had a temple dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine and drama; they had one for Athena, the goddess of wisdom in art and war; they had one for Aesculapius the god of healing, and the biggest temple in town was dedicated to numero uno in the pantheon of Greek gods—Zeus. Zeus’ massive temple was built on a hill overlooking the city and it was referred to as Zeus’ throne. It was four stories high or about four times the size of the seat Lincoln sits in down at our Lincoln Memorial.

It’s no longer in Pergamum because in 1878 an archeologist from the Berlin Museum dug up Zeus’ temple and took it back to Berlin where it has been ever since. Many people think Zeus’ throne is what Jesus was referring to in verse 13 when He says Pergamum is where “*Satan has his throne.*” And that could be true, but I agree with others who say that Jesus was referring to the fact that 1st century Pergamum was the CENTER of EMPEROR WORSHIP in that part of the world. In fact, in all the empire it was the first city to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a LIVING emperor—Caesar Augustus.

Now to make sure you understand what all this means—in other cities—like Smyrna—you could burn your pinch of incense once a year and say, “*Caesar is Lord*” ---and then you could do as you pleased on other days. That’s how OTHER Roman cities interpreted the law that made emperor worship compulsory. But in Pergamum worshiping the emperors of Rome was a 365-day deal. So, the main issue facing the believers in this city was a CONSTANT, daily pressure to deny Christ and worship the emperor as god. This made those believers FEEL as if they were living in a place where Satan called the shots.

Well, let me just stop and ask—do you ever feel like that as you live in THIS capital city? When you watch the news and hear the headlines about all that goes on inside the beltway—does it make it seem as if Satan’s having his way more often than not? I know I feel that way. At times it feels like Satan is indeed alive and well on the planet earth---which of course he IS. The devil is not in Hell—not yet. He is not locked up in the bottomless pit as he will be someday. No—he is the prince of this fallen world---the “god” of this temporary age---and he walks up and down this planet directing the sources of evil and immorality. He is especially focused on trying to drag men away from faith in Jesus.

Yes, Satan is defeated. Jesus did that when He walked out of His tomb on Easter Sunday—but in the same way a mortally wounded bear is something to steer clear of---Satan is still very dangerous.

Now you may think, *“What a tough place to plant a church—Temples to pagan Gods—the center of demonic emperor worship—Surely there was an Asian city that would have been a little more open to the Gospel message!”* Well, to answer my own question I’ll say the reason God put a church here is because God loves ALL people---even the people of Pergamum who were worshiping all those false gods. Our Heavenly Father’s heart broke for them. He longed for them to know Him—so He put His church in that dangerously difficult city to reach out to its lost residents. That was His assigned mission field for those particular Christians.

In 1865 Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled *“Mulholland’s Contract.”* I don’t know if you’ve ever read it, but the poem is about a man named Mulholland who was a cattleman on a cattle boat. His assigned workstation was in the hold—down where the cattle were carried. Well, in the poem there came a terrific storm at sea and the cattle broke loose. In their terror they were stampeding and trampling everywhere; and it seemed certain that Mulholland would be killed beneath their flailing hooves. So, Mulholland made a contract with God. As Kipling put it in his poem, Mulholland said,

*“And by the terms of the contract, as I have read the same,
If [God] got me to port alive I would exalt His Name,
And praise His Holy Majesty till further orders came.”*

Well, miraculously Mulholland made it through the storm and when he reached the shore alive, he was prepared to fulfill his part of the contract. His idea was to quit the cattle boats and preach the Gospel out in the world—but in the poem God said to him:

*“I never puts on My ministers no more than they can bear.
So back you go to the cattle-boats an’ preach My gospel there.”*

In other words, it was Mulholland’s duty, not to seek an easier place to be a Christian, but to be a Christian exactly where God had put him. And that’s the way it was with the believers in Pergamum. They were called by God and gifted by Him to share His love in that capitol city full of proud, emperor-worshiping, Christian-persecuting people. God still does that kind of thing. I mean, He still puts us in difficult places. He puts churches where they are most needed and empowers them to work there.

Now let that fact sink in for a moment. As a Christian---as His child---God has placed you where He needs you---next to neighbors who need to hear of His love—and co-workers and classmates who need to see you live out your faith. So, the next time you start to complain about your high school or your neighborhood or the place you work—stop and think, *“Almighty God has put ME here as His representative!”* That kind of changes things doesn’t it!!!

Well, let’s take it a bit further because this principle means OUR church is right where God wants it to be. This part of Maryland is Redland’s assigned part of the front lines of God’s kingdom. It may seem tough at times—but this is where God has placed us. It’s where He has equipped us to minister. He’s given each of you spiritual gifts that are needed right here!

Okay, with that background in mind, let’s look now at this letter—the report of this church’s *“stress test.”*

1.) First Jesus shares the GOOD HEALTH news that this test revealed.

Look again at verse 13 where He refers to this body of believers and says, ***“I know where you live yet you remain true to My name. You did not renounce your faith in Me, even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness, who was put to death in your city where Satan lives.”*** Now, we don’t know much about Antipas because he’s not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture but tradition tells us that he was a member of this church in Pergamum and he was seared to death inside a huge hollow brass bull because he refused to renounce his faith in Jesus.

And Antipas was apparently representative of the kind of Christian that made up this congregation. It was full of brave believers who would not give up their faith in Jesus—even though it meant enduring severe persecution and even death. In fact, the Greek phrase here that we translate, ***“did not renounce”*** — well it carries the idea of holding on to your faith in Jesus with a FIRM GRIP that won’t let go. So, you could say that, according to this “stress test,” one healthy aspect of this church was the fact that their hands were strong! Even when they suffered and died for doing so—they held tightly to their belief that Jesus is the only Son of God, the Savior of the World—the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Now, why would they do this? Why cling to their faith when it was so costly to do so? Well, I’m sure you’d agree that only a fool—only someone who does not have both oars in the water, would suffer and die for a lie. No one would suffer for something they know to be untrue. As Nabeel Qureshi puts it in current Grace-group study, ***“Liars make poor martyrs.”*** So, the only reason these people would cling to their faith in those circumstances is because they believed it WAS the TRUTH—TRUTH that was WORTH clinging to.

And convictions that you cling to no matter what—they are born of EXPERIENCE. These Christians were willing to face DEATH—because they each had experienced a personal relationship with the Living Lord—As the hymn puts it, ***“He walked with them and talked with them.”*** This experience reminded them that Jesus is the only One Who defeated death and was therefore qualified to promise them eternal LIFE.

I’m reminded of a time in Jesus’ earthly ministry when He had been teaching the throngs that were following Him that He was about to die on the cross for their sins and that only by putting their faith in Him would they receive eternal life. Jesus had been saying that the law would not save them—that their forefathers who ate the manna in the wilderness died—but that those who come to Him as the Bread of life would live forever.

Well, this was too hard of a teaching for many of them to swallow so as John 6 says, ***“From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.”*** When this happened, Jesus turned to the twelve and said, ***“You do not want to leave too, do you?”*** and Peter said, ***“Lord, where else shall we go—only You have the words of eternal life. We believe—we cling to you—because we know that You are the Holy One of God.”***

We understand what Peter meant that day don’t we? I mean, OUR conviction is that Jesus is Who He says He is—OUR belief is that Jesus did what no one else can do. He conquered our greatest enemy, death. And WE cling to this belief for dear life—because we know it TRUMPS everything life can throw at us. Nothing else can touch us—not really—because Jesus is indeed the RISEN Son of God—our Lord and Savior. Before Jesus came—we had a LOT to fear—but because of our faith in Him all that has changed.

This week I heard from Larry Dubin, who is scheduled to come here on Palm Sunday and share his presentation of ***“Christ in the Passover.”*** Sue and I count Larry and his wife Debbie as good friends. They have spoken at Redland numerous times. Larry and I even did a wedding together.

Larry emailed me to say he may have to cancel his trip to Derwood. He wrote, ***“Three weeks ago, I commenced working in a new mission field. It was confirmed last week that the Lord is using ‘cancer’ to reach medical personnel with the gospel. The initial report is that I have a combination of leukemia and lymphoma cancers. I am scheduled to see a new medical oncologist on Wednesday.”***

Do you see Larry’s faith? He doesn’t fear cancer—in fact, he sees it as a door God has opened for him to share the Gospel with his doctors and caregivers. He doesn’t fear death—for thanks to his experience with Jesus—he can say with the Apostle Paul, ***“For me—to live is Christ and to die is GAIN.”*** (Philippians 1:21)

And that's how the believers in Pergamum felt. They were unafraid. They got strength and courage from Jesus that enabled them to face ANYTHING---so they clung to their faith in Him with a FIRM grip that would not let go. Now, if you're here this morning—and you're not a Christian—then consider this. The Christians in the first century would not let go of their faith in Jesus—even in the face of persecution. And—as I said last week, persecution like they endured continues to this day.

Well, if all those millions of people down through the years were willing to suffer and die for their faith in Jesus---then Jesus must be worth knowing and following—wouldn't you agree?

If people cling to Him at such a cost—then He must be worth clinging to!

Okay, let's move to the other part of this church's "stress test report"

2.) Let's get to the BAD health news.

Look at verses 14 and 15 where our Great Physician says, ***“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin---by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”***

So, according to this report these bold believers were doing a great job of withstanding attacks that came from OUTSIDE---but they were weak when it came to threats that came from within.

Specifically, they tolerated in their midst people who taught falsehood—people who embraced the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

Well, what did Balaam and the Nicolaitans teach? You may not heard much about the Nicolaitans but I imagine you've heard Balaam's story. In fact, not too many years ago our children's choirs did a musical based on his story. But in case you missed it, I'll tell you that according to the book of Numbers---when Balak, a Moabite king, heard about the victories of the Hebrew people as they journeyed from Egypt on the way to the promised land---when Balak heard two million Hebrews were headed his way, he hired Balaam, a well-known prophet—to curse them. Balaam accepted the job, hopped on his donkey, and was on the way to do exactly that when he met an angel of the Lord---and as a result of that meeting he confessed his sin and offered to go home. The angel told him not to do that and to go with the Moabites but to only speak the words that God gave him to say. So instead of CURSING the Israelites Balaam BLESSED them four times.

But Balaam was greedy and to keep from losing his pay he told Balak to send his women to seduce the men of Israel. In essence he said, *“Balak, if you can't curse them, corrupt them.”*

Ever since then Balaamism had been known as a teaching that attacked the separation and sanctification that God expects His people to maintain. So, in short, the doctrine of Balaam was the teaching that Christ-followers could embrace the world's teachings while maintaining their Christian distinctiveness. Alexander MacLaren says, *“Balaamism is the attempt to make the best of both worlds, the earthly world and the spiritual world. It's like trying to run with the hare AND hunt with the hounds.”*

And the Nicolaitans taught the same basic thing. They believed that sinning was actually a good thing because it gave God another chance to forgive you. This led them to happily participate in the immorality of that city. They went to church on Sunday—and then attended lavish banquets in the temple to Zeus on Monday---banquets that were a form of worshiping Zeus as they ate the meat of animals that were sacrificed to him---and became involved in the sexual immorality that served as “dessert.” Perhaps the followers of Balaamism and the Nicolaitans said things like this to the members of this church—things like,

“Look, we’re not against religion or anything, but you don’t want to look like some kind of weirdo, do you? Keep that up and you’re not going to get invited to this Friday’s orgy. People aren’t going to hire you if you take this Christian thing too far.”

And some of the people in this church succumbed to that kind of internal pressure. They worshiped Jesus—but they lived like the devil. I mean, the main problem with the health of this church body was the fact that some of its members had compromised their faith. They were trying to play both sides and as a result this church in Pergamum was becoming like the world.

Instead of transforming their culture as salt and light, they were letting the culture transform them. Unfortunately, this kind of thing still happens. There are churches today with believers who tend toward this same kind of compromise.

Now, please understand. The church must be IN the world—that’s our mission field—our part of the front lines. We have to be IN the world—but we must not be OF it. Let me put it this way. It is fine for the boat to be in the water—but it’s bad for the water to be in the boat. We have to realize that following Jesus will mean living differently than people who don’t follow Him. It will make us stand out—but that’s okay. We are to be a PECULIAR people—a DISTINCT people—a SEPARATE people.

Every Tuesday and Saturday of this Upward Season---I’ve walked from the office to the ROC---and when I did I saw a peculiar rectangle of green grass. It has stood out even in these winter months. It’s grass that Jay Megary carefully nourished to health so that his Tang So Do class would have soft grass to practice on. Go look at it yourself after the service. It’s PECULIAR grass---DISTINCT grass.

Well, that’s what we are to be like. Philippians 2 says that we are to strive to be, ***“...blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation---in which we shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life...”***

AND, I would remind you that our faith really is the WORD OF LIFE—living according to God’s laws—standing out—really is the best way—the only way to REALLY live. As God says, His commands are NEVER burdensome. On the contrary, every guideline, every law---every TENDER commandment has been given not only to help us live in ways that honor God---but also to benefit US. Remember? In Jeremiah 29:11 God says to you and me, ***“I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*** And later in chapter 32 God says that His desire is, ***“...that people will always fear Him—for their own good and for the good of their children after them.”*** God’s law is not negative in nature. Its purpose is not to BURDEN us but to PROTECT us.

This week I read about a woman named, Jan Davis, 60, a professional veteran parachutist who was involved in a dangerous sport called BASE jumping—leaping off fixed objects like cliffs and towers. Sadly, it was while BASE jumping that she fell to her death October 22, 1999. Her husband, who was filming the jump, and several reporters were stunned when Jan, the 4th of 5 jumpers, fell for 20 seconds and crashed into the rocks. Her chute had not opened properly. She was jumping off the 3,200-foot granite cliff, El Capitan, in Yosemite National Park, California.

She and the other jumpers knew that BASE jumping is illegal in Yosemite Park. The law was made because there had already been six deaths in Yosemite along with numerous injuries due to BASE jumping. The five jumpers were in fact protesting the park’s jumping restrictions and, ironically, were jumping to prove that the sport is safe. These jumpers knew the law and deliberately broke it. Jan Davis paid with her life.

In a similar way, many people think they can deliberately violate God’s law. But eventually people learn, sometimes the hard way, that God’s laws are there for a reason: our well-being.

As Dorothy Sayers put it, *“You never break God’s laws; you just break yourself on them.”*

It's foolish to go along with the world if it means ignoring God's loving laws. That kind of worldly compromise is a serious health issue for any Christian—any church.

3.) What was Jesus' PRESCRIPTION?

What did He say the believers in Pergamum should do to CORRECT this HEALTH problem? It's just one word. Look at verse 16. Jesus says, ***"Here's My prescription...REPENT therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."***

This statement is in the aorist imperative tense which means it is a command to repent immediately. Jesus says, *"Don't linger—don't take a few days to think about it—no—right now, change your mind and your actions and your attitude--- because if you don't. I'll come to you residents of Pergamum—you who are so proud of your library with all its WORDS--- and I will condemn you with the WORD of TRUTH---the 'two-edged sword' that comes from My mouth."*

And remember—Jesus' WORD was a powerful opponent! With it He calmed storms, healed the sick, drove out demons, and raised the dead. God's WORD—His admonitions are never mere suggestions. They are to be taken seriously and acted on with determination and speed. So, if you are living a compromised life, Jesus would say, repent, quickly!

Okay, there's one more part of the stress test report to look at.

4.) Jesus described the HEALTH BENEFIT they could expect if they followed His guidance.

Look once more at the last part of verse 17 where Jesus says, ***"To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it."*** Now—when Jesus promises manna here—He is referring to much more than physical food. He's reminding them that He is the Bread of Life.

The manna in the wilderness sustained those people physically but Jesus came to give us abundant life—He came to satisfy the hunger for God that we all have.

Second, Jesus promised a new name—a special name that indicates our closeness and intimacy with God. I'm sure many of you have given your spouses nicknames—pet names known only to you—and whenever you call them by that name they know how special your love for them really is. You know, *"snuggles,"* or *"sweet cheeks."* Sue calls me her *"Mark Harmon!"* Well, God does that kind of thing as well. Think of the powerful nicknames He has given people in Scripture.

- *"Peter, the fearful,"* became: *"Cephas—the ROCK."*
- *"Saul the persecutor"* became *"Paul, the missionary."*
- *"Abram the childless"* became *"Abraham, the father of many nations."*

These special—God-given names—well, they communicated the fact that these individuals were special to God. And so, Jesus is saying that the person who rejects the friendship of the world will enjoy a unique friendship with God—a special closeness. When we walk close to Jesus—living according to His loving laws—even though it means standing out—we'll develop a close intimate relationship with God. We'll be like this (crossed fingers).

Now, if you were to apply this "spiritual stress test" to your own life—how would you do?

Are you clinging to your faith in Jesus as stubbornly as the Pergamum Christians did? Are you guilty of trying to live a compromised life—you know—one foot in each camp? Do you know God personally, intimately? Are you a Christ follower? To quote Jesus' letter once more, ***"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says."***

Let us pray.