

Though the Enemy Rages, Jesus Is Enough

Revelation 2:12–17

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. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷He 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.’

PRAY

Robert Mounce, in his commentary, describes Pergamum as a distinguished city built on a cone-shaped hill a thousand feet high. It was an intellectual center with a library of 200,000 volumes; it was a city that embraced Greek culture and polytheistic religious thought.

It was the place where Satan made his throne, as described in **v. 13**. That is symbolic of the spiritual and moral darkness of the city. As we have generally seen, Greek culture under the Emperor of Rome was not anti-religion or atheistic. Just the opposite. They were devoted to a deluge of deities — worthless idols that were offensively worshiped by treasonous rebels who refused to bow before the Creator who made them for his glory. Pergamum had a spectacular altar to Zeus that jutted out near the top of the mountain. Four of the most influential pagan cults of the time were centered there. Religion flourished in Pergamum, and the only thing Caesar required in this dark moral morass was that he be hailed as the god above all gods: “Caesar is lord” was the required oath. In a spiritually dark, multi-cultural city with massive pressure to let everyone embrace their own truth, the Gospel of Jesus, like an unleashed lion, was advancing and transforming lives as God ordained.

Faithful Christians in Pergamum — v. 13

Amid life-threatening opposition, believers are holding fast to the Lord's name. The name of the Lord represents all of his character and beauty. There are saints in Pergamum not ashamed to be called Christ's possession. They are not closet Christians, going along to get along. They preach the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross — that he made peace with God by the blood of that cross, and that the only way to be justified is through faith alone in Christ alone. They live as people who are new creatures, who have been freed from sin's chains and walk in newness of life, obeying Christ. Their obedience to Christ validates their testimony that Jesus is Lord.

Antipas was one such faithful saint. Alistair Begg wrote a fictional account about Antipas. The only thing we know about him is the powerful epitaph in v. 13: He was faithful to Christ though it cost him his life. I want to read Begg's fictional story because it captures the culture and what believers faced.

“What will you say if he asks you, dad? Do you have to tell him straight out that you love the Lord Jesus?” Ever since the summons from the proconsul of the province had arrived at the home of Antipas, he, his wife, and his family had spoken about little else. He knew the day would come when they would arrive at his house and escort him to the proconsular establishment, and he understood exactly what the context would be. He would be confronted by a plinth and on that a bust of the emperor with a sacred fire burning before it. And he would be invited quite simply to offer a sacrifice to the genius of Rome, to the wonder of the emperor, and to do so simply by taking some incense and casting it into the flame and in doing so, declaring Caesar is lord. Just as simple and straightforward as that. And then doubtless, someone would have said to him, “We need to retain you no longer, Antipas, and you will be perfectly free just to slip off and go home to your family.

But there was to be no family reunion, at least not in this life, for Antipas refused to compromise. After all, at his baptism, he had stood to declare that Jesus is Lord. He had become convinced of the fact that one day everyone would declare the lordship of Christ. One day at the name of this Jesus, every knee would bow, and every tongue confess. Was he then simply to overturn all of that in a moment of dreadful compromise?

He wasn't an insurrectionist. He paid his taxes. He knew that you were to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, render to God the things that are God's; but he couldn't render to Caesar a title that belonged to Jesus Christ alone. And so the silent the voice and empty chair

would have left his wife with the responsibility of answering the children's questions. "What is a martyr, mommy? Is daddy with Jesus now?"

Antipas had been won to Christ. And he pursued Christ like a deer panting for water. And Jesus was enough. Jesus satisfied his soul. ***But not all were faithful as Antipas.*** The church was guilty of tolerating compromising Christians, allowing them to have a place in its midst while they actually slandered Christ and his Gospel.

Cultural Compromisers in Pergamum — vv. 14–16a

You may feel as I do that in many ways, reading about those in the church in Pergamum is like reading a page out of Christianity Today, or something from last Friday's Religion News Service. The faithfulness of Antipas must have seemed old-fashioned and unsophisticated to those who were grasping at Gospel freedom and forgiveness with one hand, and drinking a deadly homebrew religion and sexual immorality with the other.

The teaching of Balaam, v. 14, became a sort of banner hung over all corrupt teachers who lead God's people to compromise with ideologies of the world. In **Numbers 25** we see Israel being enticed to participate in Moabite worship, which included sexual immorality and sacrifice to idols. God's judgment was poured out then, and it was only abated when those who committed the atrocities were slain. So in decadent Rome, God's good design and righteous standard for sex between one man and one woman in the confines of marriage was way too restrictive for the progressive culture. There were some among the church in Pergamum who were accommodators of the culture; they deviated from the Gospel into vain worship. The reference to food sacrificed to idols in the middle of v. 14 is probably a sacrifice actually occurring during pagan worship. In other words, it's not meat sold in the market, but they were eating the sacrifice as part of the corrupt worship. So they bundled idolatry, sexual immorality, and paganism into one package and claimed Christian liberty allowed them to do so. The Nicolaitans in v. 15 were probably a short-lived sect that, in a similar way, blended elements of pagan worship with elements of the Gospel. They are only mentioned twice in the Scripture. What dark, offensive wickedness before God!

As in 1st century Pergamum, today there are many formerly faithful denominations on this continent that have made Gospel-destroying compromise in order to be on "the right side of history." One major

4

evangelical denomination is right now in the middle of embracing the language of sexual compromise as a way of “reaching” those who engage in such immorality. Several others already have.

The human heart seems always willing to embrace a religion that starts with a cherished sin and charts a course backward, creating a false religious-sounding framework that justifies the evil the heart has already determined to do. As John Calvin said, “The human heart is a factory of idols. Every one of us is, from his mother’s womb, expert in inventing idols.”

The responsibility of the church of the Lord Jesus is to be faithful to his name — his character, and his truth — and to call those who depart from the Word of God to repentance. Such calls will be certainly be unpopular. And high-sounding motives may be offered to justify the behavior:

“To reach this generation, outdated and unsophisticated rules must be set aside. We now know that this or that is simply the way we are, and we must embrace His liberty to be who we are. We are, after all, free in Christ.”

More Antipasases are sure to come. Some may lose their life because, unless the world’s idolaters and sexually immoral folks repent and abandon their ways, they will not tolerate being made to feel uncomfortable. As for the Pergamum church, Christ says that what he has against them is that they tolerate those who will not turn from immorality, compromising with the world. The church must purge their unfaithful, deadly influence. And if the church will not deal with the fence-sitters and the syncretists, the Lord himself will come and deal with the church, and whatever threat of persecution they fear from the world will pale in comparison to the judgment of the Living King of Kings.

Christ Will Come to Pergamum — v. 16b

The proconsul in Pergamum had the power of the sword — he could slay anyone who did not do what he ordered. But the church is the bride of Christ, not the subject of the state. Jesus’ description of himself in **v. 12** and **v. 16** as having a sharp two-edged sword is a reminder to the church that we are his, and we are to fear the Lord, not man. Even if man can slay the body. You recall, don’t you, what Jesus said in his earthly ministry in **Matthew 10:28** — **And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.**

Church, our greatest need is to be oriented to God’s eternal truth, fixed forever in the heavens, not worldly wisdom that leads to death. Our greatest threat is not those who can imprison or destroy the physical body. Our greatest concern is the Lord Jesus. He knows our hearts. He is the First and the

5

Last, and to him we must give account. It is his word, like the sword coming out of his mouth, that will be the measure of righteousness and judgment.

The sharp two-edged sword of His word 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. The double edge at once wounds the sinner, revealing unrighteousness and pronouncing judgment on it, and it heals the saint, cutting away the stony sinful heart with its deadly rebellion. The sword of his word is wielded against the tempter, winning over unbelief and reorienting us to the things of God. It is the sword of his mouth that is our sole authority of faith and practice. It establishes the church, instructs her, fits her for heaven, and equips her to stand even where Satan's throne is. It is His word — his unchanging, published truth that endures forever — that he uses to silence all his enemies and triumphs in the end. Thank God for his living, quickening word! Oh! Read his word! Love his word! Rejoice in his word! Meditate on his Word! Hide his word in your heart that you might not sin against him. His word stands forever.

Reformed and Always Reforming — v. 17a

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. One of the slogans that came out of the Reformation was “Reformed and always reforming.” It means that we must always be reoriented to the Word of God. What began in 1517 is an ongoing work — not of constantly changing to adjust to the culture. That's exactly what the problem was in Pergamum. The ongoing work of reformation is probing deeper into the word of God so that we know and are conformed more fully to the heart and character of Christ. We are to listen to his word, his voice.

Churches in their early days are hungry and desperate to hear from the Lord. They realize their utter dependence on him. As time goes, like a teen in driver's ed who at first is first dependent on an instructor eventually drives away to independence.. The Church tends to move away from dependence on Christ to confidence in its own ingenuity and effort for winning a lost world. That is never the intent of the Lord for his church. His plan is that we not only realize our dependence at the beginning of our walk, owning our poverty of spirit, but that we increasingly grow in awareness of our utter dependence on him. Ongoing usefulness to the Lord depends on us realizing with heart-certainty, not just head knowledge, that apart from him I can do nothing.

6

So Jesus says, do you hear me? Are you oriented to what I say? He who has an ear, listen to me. Redeemer's Grace, are we earnestly seeking to know what the Lord is saying to his church, or have we "matured" to operating in way that mitigates offense to the culture to reduce the cultural price we would otherwise pay? Well I don't think we've embraced a wholesale compromise with idolatry or immorality of the world, thank God. But if we are not listening, if we lose our ear to hear, we will soon enough lose our way as they did and he will remove us. There is no 1st Church of Pergamum today.

Tune your heart to the Lord. Hear what he is saying; let his word transform and renew your mind. The call to repent and be faithful to him is a loving call to life. Is there anywhere that you have compromised with the world's idolatry or sexual sin? His call to return to him is a grace-filled call from death to life. Allow his word to probe and examine you that sin may be exposed and turned from. What hope have you of winning if the Lord comes to make war against you?

To the One Who Conquers — v. 17b

Victory is possible! When we come to Christ in faith and walk with him, we will overcome. Preach that to yourself! Confront the sin that runs deep in your heart and cries out that you will die if you touch that particular root of sin. Satan is a liar. In Christ, in communion with him, victory over sin is a reality.

Hidden manna and white stones

What is hidden manna? I'm not sure, but we have a really big clue from the Exodus.. Manna was God's supernatural provision to care for his people, to supply their need in a hostile environment when they had no capacity to provide for themselves. When Jesus says, "To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna," he is saying he takes upon himself to provide and supply for his people as they remain faithful to him. The world may cancel you, but the world can't cancel Christ. And Christ is enough. His provision may be unconventional, it may be supernatural, and it may not even be in this life — but the Good Shepherd will provide life and blessing to his servants, and it will satisfy their souls, even if the body is killed. Ultimately it is not approval from the world that satisfies, but communion with him.

And what is the white stone with a new name written on it? I don't know. No one knows except the one who receives it. But it sounds really cool, and in the context of God's care, and provision, and grace, I think you'll really be happy if you get one.

PRAY