

Hear What The Spirit Says Pergamum

We continue our series looking at the messages from Jesus to the seven churches in Revelation. Remember these were seven literal churches in Turkey. The letters were written to specific churches but were no doubt read and heard by all of the churches. We believe the message was not only for those churches but for us also for John writes, **“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” Revelation 1:3** This message is for all of us, for every church, for every follower of Jesus.

Pergamum is the third church. The city is about fifty miles north of Smyrna, the church we looked at two Sundays ago. **(Map)** Pergamum was situated on and around a hill that rose a thousand feet above the plain below. From Pergamum you could see the Aegean Sea 15 miles to the west. It was an impressive city of some 200,000. It had been the seat of government for the area for about 400 years and was still so at the time of Jesus’ letter. The Roman proconsul or governor was located here. Even though Ephesus and Smyrna may have been larger cities and were more strategically placed on the trade routes, Pergamum was an important city politically and the seat of Roman power in Asia Minor.

Pergamum was also a leading religious center. As in the other cities, the Emperor cult was huge here with an early and impressive temple built to Caesar Augustus. There was a temple to Zeus on top of the hill, one to Athena, to Asclepius the Greek god of healing, temples to Dionysus (god of wine), Trajan, and others. The Jesus followers were surrounded by pagans and pagan influence and idolatry. The pressure to compromise their faith was unrelenting in Pergamum. With that said, let’s read what Jesus writes to the church. **“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 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.’” Revelation 2:12-13**

Notice he refers back to the image of Jesus that John saw in Revelation 1:16. “Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword.” Why is this significant? Quoting from one bible scholar, “...the sword was the symbol of the highest order of official authority, with which the Proconsul of Asia was invested. The ‘right of the sword’ *jus gladii*, was roughly equivalent to what we call the power of life and death and governors of Provinces were divided into a higher

and a lower class, according as they were or were not invested with this power.” Some had the power of life and death and some didn’t. The proconsul at Pergamum had the power of the sword. He had authority to kill and could have people executed immediately if he chose. The church at Pergamum needed to hear Jesus has the power of the sharp, double edged sword - that power of life and death ultimately belongs to Jesus and not the governor or the emperor. The governor could put you to death, but Jesus said, **“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28.** The church does well to remember who is ultimately in charge and holds all authority, dominion and power.

Once again we hear Jesus say to his church, “I know you...I know where you live, you live where Satan has his throne.” Talk about a bad neighborhood! If Jesus knew where the church in Pergamum lived, he knows where you live. He knows your circumstances, your situation. He knows what you are facing, what you are dealing with. Carbondale church, he knows where we are. He knows our neighborhood, he knows what we face in Southwest Tulsa. He knows Tulsa, he knows our past, our problems, the racial and geographic inequities, he knows our potential and possibilities, he knows why he has positioned our church here, he knows our future. We aren’t here by accident. You aren’t here by accident. He knows where you live!

He knows Pergamum was where Satan has his throne. He isn’t saying Pergamum is the capital of hell, but I think he is saying it is a hotbed of idolatry and immorality and where Satan and his influence runs unchecked and unhindered. Satan had set up a stronghold in that city through all of the idolatrous temples.

Notice, Jesus regarded Satan as a real adversary and enemy of the church. Satan isn’t a myth. There is a real enemy warring against the church, against every follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the risen, victorious King of Kings and Lord of Lords, yet there is still a battle going on and we, the church, are expected to remain faithful to Jesus and to his name even though we may dwell in the very heart of Satan’s territory and domain, even in the city where Satan lives.

Jesus said “In spite of the fact you live where Satan has his throne, in the very heart of Satan’s stronghold, “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.”

Even in the face of persecution they refused to deny the faith. They remained true to his name. Remember the demand from Rome was that periodically all citizens would pledge their loyalty not only to Rome, but to the Emperor. And not only loyalty to the Emperor, but to actually worship the Emperor as a god. They were required to sprinkle incense on a sacred fire before a statue of the Emperor and declare that Caesar is Lord. How could they do that when the bible declared Jesus is Lord? The bible says of Jesus that “God exalted him to the highest place” “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion and every title that can be given” and “gave him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...” Phil. 2:9-11, Eph. 1:20-21. You can’t make both Jesus and Caesar Lord. You have to choose one or the other! The church in Pergamum chose Jesus as Lord and refused to renounce their faith in him as Savior.

Jesus mentioned Antipas, his faithful witness. We don’t know exactly who he is. Church tradition says he was roasted alive in a bronze kettle during the rule of Domitian. The indication is that he was not the only one, but simply one the members of the church knew and honored as a martyr, one that had exemplified what it means to remain faithful to the Lord. Notice Jesus speaks of him as “my faithful witness.” Those who suffer for Jesus are not forgotten or lost to him. The church at Pergamum understood and refused to be intimidated, even though they lived in the shadow of the throne of Satan himself! They refused to yield to threat or force from the persecuting authorities, but... there was a problem. Look what Jesus 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. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” Revelation 2:14-16** What is all of this about?

Notice it isn’t “either/or”. Jesus loves his church and he is pleased with some things but not pleased with others. He sees the direction they are headed and warns them about some of the teaching they are allowing and listening to. It would lead to compromise and judgment so Jesus is calling them to repent and correct their course. We need to examine our own lives today. Are there some things Jesus has against us? Areas of compromise, failure, sin? Areas that need attention, that require repentance and a change in direction? Do we need to correct our course?

Notice this: What we believe matters! There are matters of doctrinal truth that are simply non-negotiable. For instance, To be a Christian means we believe that Jesus is the unique God/man who died for our sins and was raised from the dead to be our Savior and the Savior of the whole world. In order to be saved we must repent of our sins and place our faith and trust in Jesus as our Savior and Lord. That's non-negotiable. Jesus commended them because they remained true to his name – that he was Jesus, the Christ, the Savior, and they did not renounce their faith in him, i.e. they had individually believed upon and placed their faith in Him as their personal Savior and Lord. They held to that doctrinal truth about Jesus.

But there is another truth we mustn't sacrifice or renounce in addition to doctrinal truth and that is ethical truth. A Christian is one who not only believes upon Jesus as Savior but also follows him in obedience, choosing to live a life of holiness before the Lord. We believe in him and we live for him. John Stott says "Christianity exalts Christ and promotes holiness."

The church at Pergamum may have gotten the first part right, believing upon Jesus as their Savior, but they were abandoning the teaching and practice of living a holy life in obedience to him. They were embracing the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans. What was this teaching? Most likely they were referring to the same thing, to similar teachings. And what was at the heart of the teaching? Compromise!

You can read the story of Balaam in the Old Testament book of Numbers 22-31. Balaam was a prophet who was hired by the King of Moab to curse his enemy, the Israelites. Balaam told the king he could only prophecy what God told him to say but Balak thought if he paid Balaam enough he could convince him to curse the people. Balaam repeatedly tried to curse the nation of Israel and each time he ended up speaking blessing. Finally, Balaam said, "You can't over power Israel and I can't curse them when God has blessed them, however, here is how you can defeat Israel. Send your Moabite women into the camp and entice the men to commit adultery. Then the Moabite women can lead the men into worshipping the idols they bring with them." That's exactly what happened. The bible says, **"The men of Israel began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them."** Numbers 25:1-3

It's Satan's strategy. Either persecute the church, seduce the church or both. That's what was happening at Pergamum. Persecution and seduction to compromise. Get them to embrace

sin, tolerate it, accommodate it, excuse it. The teaching of Balaam said you could be saved but still engage in sexual immorality and sin. “A little compromise won’t hurt anything. Let down your guard. You’re being persecuted but offering a little incense to the statue of Caesar and declaring him Lord, what can that hurt? You still love Jesus don’t you? And so what if you are cheating on your spouse or living with someone and not married or engaging in other behavior the bible identifies as sin, you still love Jesus don’t you? You asked him to save you didn’t you?” The teaching of Balaam in the O.T. and the teaching of the Nicolaitans in the N.T. basically said its okay, go to the temples, join in the celebrations honoring the gods and eat at their sacred feasts, engage in sexual immorality, live as you please, just make sure you still say you love Jesus.

I think the Nicolaitans were the religious progressives of their day. They looked down on the unsophisticated, uneducated Bible believing Christians in Pergamum. “You need to understand,” they argued, “Jesus has set us free, we’re no longer under the law but under grace so we can do as we please. After all, we are all human. Jesus doesn’t expect us to be perfect.” But Jesus won’t have it! He won’t tolerate sin and compromise and we mustn’t either. **We want the benefits of grace without the cost of discipleship. It doesn’t work that way. He calls us to repentance, to right teaching and to right living!** If we have made him Savior, we must also make him Lord of our life.

Understand, Jesus is Savior and Lord and he won’t share his throne with any other. Compromise leads you to enthrone someone or something else next to Jesus. That’s what was happening in Pergamum and what’s happening to the church today. What’s wrong with offering incense to the Caesar? It enthrones Caesar next to Jesus and you can’t serve two masters! What’s wrong with living an immoral life? It’s enthroning yourself and your desires next to Jesus, or above Jesus. It’s choosing to live as you please rather than living to please Jesus. “I’ll die for Jesus, I just won’t live for him.” It doesn’t work that way!

This word from Jesus to the church is requiring the same thing the first church council required, fifty years before: to abstain from sexual immorality. Like the church at Pergamum, we live in a culture that embraces sexual immorality, that says casual sex is fine and that looks at the church as if we are crazy for teaching sexual purity. But God is the one that created us and created sexual expression and he is also the one that set it within the boundary of one-man-one-woman marriage. What the bible teaches is that sexuality matters because what we do with our

body sexually can determine our eternal destiny. The bible says the sexually immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Cor. 6:9-10. Let me explain...

The word most often translated as sexual immorality in the New Testament is from a word meaning “to sell off.” It means selling off or surrendering sexual purity. It’s a term that refers to all sexual activity outside of marriage. Let me say it again, God created and designed sex and he set the boundaries for its use. The bible makes it clear sex belongs in that “one-flesh” covenant of marriage between a man and a woman and any sexual expression outside of biblical marriage, whether pre-marital sex, casual sex, co-habitation, adultery, cheating on your spouse, whether heterosexual or homosexual behavior, the bible considers it to be outside of God’s design and order and the bible then condemns it. It is sin and displeasing to God and that places it under God’s judgment. Sexual sin isn’t the only sin in the bible, I get that, but it’s part of the compromise that corrupts the church in Pergamum, at Carbondale or anywhere else and places us in the path of God’s judgment. Jesus called the church at Pergamum and us to repentance, to holiness in our life. The good news is there is healing for us, even for sexual brokenness.

The church at Pergamum lived where Satan lived. They were being persecuted for their faith, but their biggest problem wasn’t the open attack of Satan or the temples filled with idols or the persecution by the Romans – their biggest problem was the sin and compromise in their own heart and life. Jesus warned them you have to repent or judgement will come. Not only must we renounce the sin in our own life, but we can’t remain indifferent to the spirit of compromise around us. That doesn’t mean you have to go around pointing out everyone else’s sin. We all need to deal with our own sin and compromise. But it means we can’t compromise on speaking and proclaiming the truth. Regardless of the price to be paid, we must speak the truth.

“Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” Jesus calls the church to repentance. Repentance is not just feeling bad while continuing to do wrong, it is recognizing the wrong, reversing course and returning to what is right. Repentance can be hard. It’s demanding and costly, but it is life-giving. If we don’t repent, if we don’t reverse course and do what is right by his grace, Jesus says he will come and deal with it.

Remember your dad or mom saying, “Don’t make me come in there. Don’t make me pull this car over.” Jesus is saying, “Reverse course. Repent! Don’t make me come in there.” He loves us. That’s why he corrects us and disciplines us, because he loves us, but we don’t

want him to fight against us. We don't want him to have to come to us in judgment or correction. It's time to repent and to get rid of the compromise.

“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.” Revelation 2:17

The Spirit is speaking and we can hear. It's time to repent. And here is his promise: to everyone who hears and obeys, to everyone who stays the course and overcomes, who repents and keeps serving Jesus and living for him, there is a reward coming. He mentions two things we don't quite understand: hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it.

Manna was the supernatural bread from heaven that fed the Israelites during their 40 years in the wilderness. In John's gospel Jesus tells the people he is the true bread from heaven, the living bread and if we eat that bread we'll have eternal life. I think he is telling them whatever satisfaction they might have anticipated by eating food sacrificed to idols, if they refuse to compromise and remain true to him, there is a feast coming in his presence that is unrivaled by anything this world can offer. Food can satisfy us at one level, but Jesus is promising to satisfy the deepest longing of our soul if we remain faithful to him and refuse to give up!

What's the meaning of the white stone and the name on it? Preachers and scholars have speculated but the truth is, we can't be certain. I'll offer my opinion. What we know is that a new name is written on it and written on a stone so it is permanent and imperishable. Is it a new name God is giving to us or a new name for God that he will share with us? Either one sounds wonderful. Maybe he will give us a stone with a new name to call God, a new revelation of God and who he is because he is beyond knowing. To all who overcome, we will be with him and he will reveal himself to us in a deeper level of intimacy and knowledge – a level beyond anything we can conceive.

Or perhaps it's a new name for us. Maybe it is a spiritual name that he will call us, a name known only to Jesus and you or me, a name that suggests a unique knowledge and intimacy. My name is Philip, but only a few people call me that. Only one person calls me husband, only two people call me Dad. The more endearing or intimate the term, the more restricted and exclusive its use. Jesus knows each of us by name. Maybe written on the stone is a new name that in heaven reflects who we are as the overcoming believer, now clothed in his righteousness, now complete in him, glorified, redeemed. We've been a work in progress, but on

that day we will stand complete, the finished product, conformed to his image and we get that white stone with a new name written on it. God says, “This is who I’ve been fashioning you to be!” And we will rejoice in the completeness of that new name. “This is who I am!”

Whatever it means, it means something incredible, for eye has not seen, ear has not heard, neither has it entered into the heart and mind of men and women what the Lord has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor. 2:9).

There is a promise given, a blessing assured but it is for those who overcome. It starts here, with repentance, determining that we will live for Jesus. I want us to take a moment. Examine your heart, your life. Is there compromise? Are there things in your life that you know are displeasing to God? Are there things that would cause Jesus to come and fight against the compromise in your life? Don’t make him come correct you. Let’s deal with it today. Let’s repent and get things right with the Lord. Let’s hear what the Spirit is saying to us today!