



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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To the Church in Pergamum Revelation 2:12-17

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John's vision recorded in Revelation begins with a vision of Jesus himself. He appears as both Daniel's son of man and ancient of days. He's clothed as the high priest. His word appears as a two-edged sword. As we saw last month, the vision is packed full of imagery from the Old Testament. Jesus announced that he was the first and the last, the one who died and rose again, the one who holds the keys of death and hades. And he urges John to write, to exhort the churches of Asia as they face the difficult times to come. Jesus holds them in his hand. They're like the lampstand in the temple and as the high priest, he will tend them to ensure their flame does not go out.

And in the seven letters that follow, sent to all the churches, but each in turn addressed to a specific church, Jesus exhorts and, in most cases, rebukes them. He sustains them, but to survive the coming time of trial, they also need to pursue faithfulness to him, to pursue holiness, to hold to his word with single-minded devotion. To each church he begins by reminding them of a bit of that awesome vision of himself. To the Ephesians he comes as the one who holds the stars in his hand and who walks amongst the lampstands. To the Smyrnaeans he is the first and last, the one who died and rose again. And to each church he gives a promise. In 2:7 he exhorts them saying, "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." In verse 11 he says, "The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." Each is tuned to the unique situation of the church being addressed, but each speaks also to the other churches—and to us.

This morning we'll continue with verses 12-17 of Chapter 2. These are Jesus' words to the church in Pergamum, a city some 70 kilometres up the coast and north of Smyrna. Jesus says:

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.'"
(Revelation 2:12)

Do you remember the three things I've said Revelation is about? It's about tribulation, it's about kingdom, and it's about perseverance. Jesus' people live in the midst of tribulation and it's only going to get worse for them, and so Jesus addresses them first by reminding them who he is, again drawing on the imagery we saw in Chapter 1. Think on how he came to the Smyrnaeans in the last passage we looked at. He exhorted them in the end that the second death will not hurt the one who conquers. And he can only say that because, as he came to the people of that church, he is the one who died and was raised to life. He is the conqueror of death and so his people need not fear death. Things are hard, but Jesus exhorts his people to persevere. But he doesn't just give them platitudes. He reminds them that he is with them. The kingdom is now. The kingdom is here. As his church, they are his kingdom and their king is with them. They're not walking through territory that is unknown to their Lord. Jesus has travelled this path before them and he stands with them now.

This is what he's getting at now when he reminds them he is the one who bears the "sharp two-edged sword". This takes us back to 1:16: "from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword". Jesus' word isn't just any word, because Jesus himself is God's word incarnate. His word is the truth that brings life. But his word also comes with both authority and judgement. We'll see this as we work through the passage and as we learn a little bit about Pergamum.

To compare things to our world, if Ephesus was the Toronto or Montréal of the Roman province of Asia, Pergamum would have been Ottawa. It was sort of the administrative capital of the Romans in Asia. And while the imperial cult was big in both Ephesus and Smyrna,

Pergamum boasted the oldest temple in the province devoted to the divine Caesar. Pergamum was a seaport and, towering above the port was the acropolis—a 400 metre high mountain topped by a great temple dedicated to Zeus. If you were approaching the city from the south, it's said that the acropolis had the appearance of an enormous throne towering above it. Of course, Pergamum was known for its worship of other gods too. Asklepios, the god of healing, was extremely important to the city.

The church in Pergamum would struggle for centuries. Pergamum was a place of deeply entrenched paganism, and while the land and cities around it gradually submitted to Jesus as Lord, the people of Pergamum did not. The people of the city worshiped Zeus as "Saviour". They had a library of great renown. Parchment was invented there and, through Latin and French, "Pergamum" is where our word "parchment" comes from. They had the famous healing work of the priests of Asklepios who bore long lists of their god's miracles. And over-arching all of that was the rule of Caesar, the divine saviour and peacemaker of the empire. So the pagans of Pergamum had a whole system to care for body, mind, and soul. They were proud of it. In fact, even as the Roman emperors themselves came to faith in Jesus, it would be through Pergamum that the devil would strike, one last attempt to halt the conversion of the empire to Jesus. You may have heard of Julian the Apostate. He reigned as emperor from 361 to 363. About fifty years after Constantine began the process of bringing the empire to Christ. A dynasty of Christian emperors followed him. But the devil got hold of Julian and, it seems, he did so in large part through the paganism of Pergamum. Julian's person physician was from the city and a devotee of Asklepios. It was the Neoplatonism of this teacher that pushed Julian into apostasy and, as emperor, he did his best to restore the empire to paganism. Thankfully his reign was a very short one. Pergamum was a very dark place and would continue to be for many years to come. If there was ever a place where the church needed an exhortation

to persevere in the face of tribulation, it was Pergamum.

Now let's look at the heart of Jesus word to them, beginning at verse 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. 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 sacrificed 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 the sword of 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.” (Revelation 12:13-17)

Jesus knows their situation. The Satan has his throne in Pergamum. It's not easy to say exactly what that means. The Satan is a title, literally “the accuser”. In Revelation 20:2 John refers to him as “the ancient serpent”. And that may be one clue. The symbol of the god Asklepios was a serpent. But, too, there was that great acropolis, which towered over the city like a giant throne with its temple of Zeus on top. Zeus was another false saviour. And, too, Pergamum was Rome's administrative capital in the East and a major centre of the imperial cult. But I think it's worth noting that John never identifies Rome with the devil. What John understood was that the devil had captured the heart of Rome and was using the empire to accomplish his own purposes and, especially to attack the Church.

At the same time, we saw in the last letter, the one to Smyrna, that Jesus associated the Satan with the synagogue of the unbelieving Jews there—the Jews

who, themselves, had an exemption from worshipping the emperor, but who were only too happy to rat out the Christians in the city when they refused to worship the emperor as lord. I think the key point here is that the Satan was working to attack and undermine the church of Jesus, whether that was through the influence of false gods with rival claims to be saviour and healer, the imperial cult that pressured everyone to acknowledge Caesar as divine, or unbelieving Jews collaborating with the Roman authorities to arrest and even execute Christians. In some places the opposition was worse than others, but in Pergamum all of these things were happening at once and it was easy for the Christians there to lose hope. It was as if the Satan was up there on the acropolis looking down, spotting Christians, and sending his Roman or Greek or Jewish minions after them.

It was a truly difficult situation, but Jesus exhorts them. “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.” Despite all the pressure they have held fast to Jesus, they have not denied his name and they have not denied their faith in him. The Romans insisted they offer a pinch of incense to Caesar, the world's lord, and they refused. Jesus is the true Lord. The Greek's laughed at them for worshipping Jesus instead of Zeus or for calling the elders of the church to pray for the sick instead of taking them to the temple of Asklepios. But, again, the Christians knew—and were absolutely sure—that Jesus is Saviour. The Jews threatened to rat them out to the Romans, but again, they stood firm in their faith in Jesus. And these weren't idle threats. They stood firm even as their brother, Antipas, was martyred for this faith in Jesus.

We don't know anything about Antipas other than what's written here. It seems fitting that his name means “against all”. Everything in Pergamum was against him and so he stood against everything in Pergamum, holding fast to his faith in Jesus. He became a true witness. And the other Christians in the church there, instead of giving up the faith after

seeing Antipas killed, had only grown in faith because of his witness. Jesus praises his people for all of this.

But. There's a big but. Jesus says he's got two things against them. First, there are some in the church who hold to what Jesus calls the “teaching of Balaam” and, second, that there are some who hold to the “teaching of the Nicolaitans”.

Jesus mentioned this second group, the Nicolaitans, before in his letter to the Ephesians: “You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate”. Who were the Nicolaitans? No one's really sure. The Second Century Church Fathers wrote about a heretical gnostic sect called the Nicolaitans, but it's not clear that John is talking about the same people. Most commentators think that the two groups mentioned here are the same—and that the followers of “Jezebel” in the next letter to Thyatira are all one and the same. The first group follows the teaching of Balaam and the second the teaching of Nikolaus. It seems like there's some wordplay going on here, because Balaam, in Hebrew, means “conqueror or destroyer of the people” and Nikolaus means the same thing in Greek. The leader of this movement was almost certainly someone named Nikolaus, and here he's connected with Balaam, the Moabite prophet we read about in Numbers. Let's go back to that.

It was during the Exodus. The Israelites were on their way from Egypt to the promised land. Balak, the King of Moab, saw them and was afraid. He summoned the elders of Moab and Midian for a conference. They decided that there were far too many Israelites to risk battle, so they decided to first send the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. If Israel were cursed, then the Moabite army might defeat them. But the Lord would not let Balaam curse Israel. And so, instead, Balaam encouraged King Balak to put a stumbling block before Israel (cf. Numbers 31:16), and in Numbers 25 we read that Israel “began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods,

and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.”

As Balak put a stumbling block before the people of Israel and enticed them into apostasy through sexual immorality and meat offered to idols, just so the Satan, through this false teacher Nikolaus and his false apostles and prophets, has placed a stumbling block before the Christians of Pergamum—one that involved the idolatry of the pagan city.

In Acts 15 we read that the apostles met together to address the issue of Gentile believers. Up to that point, almost everyone in the Church was Jewish and what to do with the *torah* wasn't a big issue. But when Gentiles began coming to Jesus it raised the question of how the law related to them. Did they first need to become Jews through circumcision? Did they have to obey the *torah*? And the apostles concluded that, no, they didn't. Here's what they said:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. (Acts 15:28-29)

Why these things specifically? Well, sexual immorality and meat offerings to idols were a common and integral part of pagan life. Ritual prostitution was a regular part of pagan religious life and so many animals were sacrificed to the pagan gods that their temples were the de facto restaurants and butcher shops pretty much everywhere. It also wasn't a big step for many former pagans to go from eating that meat at home to eating it in the temples where it was sacrificed and then getting dragged back into the often debauched ceremonies and rituals of those temples. So contrary to the Spirit-inspired teaching of the apostles, the Nicolaitans—whose apostles and prophets the local church was

permitting—were undermining the apostles and saying that these things were actually okay.

Nothing here tells us why these false teachers were permitted in the church in Pergamum. Maybe no one knew quite what to do with them. Maybe no one wanted to take responsibility. Maybe they liked what they were hearing. They were holding firm and not denying the name of Jesus in the face of the pagans around them, but doing that would probably have been a lot easier if they weren't turning down the invitations to feast in the temples. People might think it was weird that you worshiped a crucified Jew, but if you still took part in the fertility rites at the temple like everyone else, well, whatever—this Christianity stuff apparently wasn't as subversive or as counter-cultural as they'd heard.

Brothers and Sisters, compromise and immorality are tempting. The people around us today think of Christians, at best, as judgemental killjoys, and at worst, as haters and bigots. And they do that because they know what the Bible and Jesus and Christianity stand for and, just like the pagans of Pergamum, they don't like it. Our faith challenges their gods, their sins, their selfishness. Or at least it should. But it's easy to cave to the pressure. Sometimes we're tempted to partake of the world's corruption so that we can avoid its anger and hatred. Everyone else at work is cheating and the pressure is on, so we cheat too lest everyone be angry with us or mock us for being goody-two-shoes. Like I said last time, the world has bowed to sexual immorality and Postmodern, Marxist theories of identity and sexuality and if you don't go along with it you're labelled a hater or a bigot, so we go along to make life easier. And, increasingly in Evangelical circles, it's justified in the name of “witness”. We compromise whatever it is about the faith that brings the hatred and scorn of the world—as if we can somehow be nicer and more gracious than Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, we can't. That path leads only to compromise and apostasy.

But it's often not the pressure to conform to avoid opposition. It's often just that sin is fun and when everyone's doing it, we think we might as well join in and we find ways to justify it. Everybody's watching those smutty shows on TV, so why shouldn't I? All the other kids are having sex, so why shouldn't I? Everybody else has made a god of their job or their politics or their RRSP, so why shouldn't I? Everyone else has bought into the selfish, commercialistic, materialistic ethos of the age, so why shouldn't I? And pretty soon you've got a church that names the name of Jesus, but in practice is nothing like the church. Whether that's the churches catering to felt needs and our self-centred culture by preaching pop-psychology and putting on rock concerts instead of worship services or the Anglican and Episcopal churches from which many of us came that still look very churchy and traditional in terms of worship, but have embraced sexual immorality and all the other ideological idols of our day. They confidently name the name of Jesus, but there is no obedience to him, there is no call to holiness, there is no call to sacrifice. Brothers and Sisters, it means little to stand firm on the name of Jesus if we are not also going to stand firm on his gospel—if we are not going to repent, turning aside from every false god and every false way, and not only naming his name, but following in his way.

And Jesus makes it clear here that he means business. In verse 16 Jesus says, “Repent! If you don't, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.” The Angel of the Lord met Balaam with a sword and Jesus will meet these folks with a sword too—the false prophets and apostles, but also the leaders of the church who permit their influence. This isn't about the “second coming”. This is about an imminent judgment that was about to take place in history. It's a judgement that has come on church after church after church for the last two thousand years whenever false teachers are indulged by their people and leaders. Jesus is jealous of his church and he will come in judgement with his word to

purify it where it persists in heresy and immorality despite his calls to repent.

But, Jesus goes on, “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.” Throughout the New Testament the Church is compared to Israel in the wilderness. It’s hostile country with little food and enemies all around, but Jesus promises to those who “conquer”—to those who stand firm in faith, not just in word, but also in deed—he will give the hidden manna. He will care for us, he will feed us as he cared for and fed his people in the wilderness as he led them from Egypt to the promised land. Whatever we need to persevere, he will provide and first and foremost that is himself. He is the one whom John calls the bread of heaven. Remember that he is the one who walks in the midst of the lampstands like the high priest in the temple, keeping them filled with oil and trimming the wicks that their flame never go out. Jesus has created his church, he has filled it with his own Spirit, and he will sustain it no matter how bad things get. Our duty is to trust him and to walk in obedience.

Jesus says, too, that to those who conquer he will give a white stone with a new name written on it. This one’s difficult. There are several different interpretations and I don’t know that we can be certain of any of them, but the most likely meaning seems to be rooted in an ancient custom of guests to a feast being given a stone with their name on it as a kind of ticket to get in. The kingdom is often portrayed as a feast at the end of the age, a feast where God comforts and feeds his people in his presence. And Jesus is the one who brings us into the feast, into the presence of the Father. He has died for the sins of his people and his risen to life as conqueror of sin and death. If we will hold fast to him in faith as he exhorts us to do here, he will give us his name usher us into the presence of his Father, into that great feast, into the very life of God. He says he will give us a

new name. Through Isaiah the Lord made this promise:

The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. (Isaiah 62:2)

We who were not a people, will through Jesus, become the children of God. We who were God’s enemies, through Jesus, will become his beloved sons and daughters. We who belonged to the satan and were in bondage to sin and death, will be set free and ushered into the life of God bearing the name of Jesus himself. I think this explains the bit about no one knowing the name. The point isn’t that the name is secret. This is a Hebrew idiom and the idea is that the name is known in the sense of owning it. The Nicolaitans claimed the name of Jesus, they called themselves Christians, but as so many have done down through the ages and as so many do today, they never truly owned it. The name of “Christian” belongs only to those who overcome. They and they alone, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, have a share in the feast.

So, Brothers and Sisters, come this morning. The Lord invites you to his Table. Here, as we eat the bread and drink the wine, we recall the sacrifice of Jesus for us, we recall his resurrection, and we participate, ourselves, in those events by which Jesus has formed a new people for himself. Know again the depth of love, the depth of grace, the depth of mercy that God has shown for sinners in Jesus, and in return be exhorted to commit to him not just in name, but in deed—in life and every part of it. Bear the name of Jesus faithfully and boldly no matter the cost. For Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Let’s pray: Lord, in the Collect we asked you: govern all things both in heaven and on earth: “Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace.” Grant us your peace Lord, even as we walk in the

midst of tribulation. Remind us that your kingdom is here and that Jesus sustains us and walks with us. Grant us your peace that we might stand firm in our faith in your promises, that we might stand firm in Jesus without compromise, that we might be faithful in bearing his name and being his witnesses. Through him we pray. Amen.