

Pergamos: The Compromising Church

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[0 : 00] This evening, with the Lord's help, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read. Book of Revelation, Revelation chapter 2.

And continuing our study, we're looking at verse 12. Where Jesus says, 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 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 them 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.

[1 : 38] What would Jesus say about our church? What would Jesus say about our church? That's the question, you know, we should be asking ourselves as we consider the contents of these letters to the seven churches in Asia.

What would Jesus say about our church? What would Jesus say about Barba's free church? And you know, it's a very searching and a very sobering question, isn't it?

What would Jesus say about the spiritual temperature of our church? What would Jesus say about the spiritual temperament of our church? Would Jesus commend us or condemn us?

Would Jesus comfort us or correct us? Would Jesus console us or critique us? What would Jesus say about Barba's free church?

Because as we said before, a healthy gospel church is not about figures. It's about faith. It's not about quantity. It's about quality. It's not about goals. It's about godliness.

[2 : 43] It's not about popularity. It's about preaching, pastoring and praying. Because a healthy gospel church is focused and fixated upon Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

And that's the vision, as we said before, that's the vision Jesus is revealing to John in this revelation. Because this apocalypse, this apocalypsis, as John calls it, where God is lifting the lid and removing the veil and pulling back the curtain.

John is here seeing Jesus as the risen, ruling and reigning king who is going to return. And this revelation, this apocalypse, it's for the universal church.

It's for the whole church of Jesus Christ. It's for the whole church of Jesus Christ. Not only in the first century, when it was written, but also in every century. Because that's what the seven churches symbolize.

They symbolize the universal church of Jesus Christ in every century. But as we said before, the seven churches are not only symbolic, they're also specific.

[3 : 46] Because they emphasize, as we go through them, they emphasize and they exemplify to us specific sins. Or specific struggles and stresses and strains that the church of Jesus Christ faces and will face in every century of its existence.

And so this evening, as we work our way through chapter 2, we're considering the third of the seven churches in Asia. Which is Pergamum or Pergamos, depending upon which Bible version you use. And the church in Pergamos is often described as the compromising church. Pergamos was the compromising church.

And so we're going to look at this church under our two usual headings. A word of commendation and then a word of correction. A word of commendation and then a word of correction.

So first of all, Jesus gives a word of commendation. He says there in verse 12, You remember that the first church which Jesus addressed was Ephesus.

[5 : 13] It was the loveless church. Because despite its deep history in sound and solid theology, the church in Ephesus, they had become legalistic in their head and loveless in their heart.

However, 35 miles north from the seaport city of Ephesus was the seaport city of Smyrna. And as we saw last week, the church in Smyrna was a persecuted church.

They were persecuted because they refused to concede and confess Kaiser Curios. Caesar is Lord. Instead, they continued to confess Jesus is Lord.

And because of their faithfulness, Jesus gave them this word of consolation. We read it earlier where Jesus said, Do not fear what you're about to suffer. And then he goes on to say, Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

But this evening, as you can see, we're continuing to travel north. We're going north towards Pergamos. But as we travel about 60 miles north, we have to go 15 miles inland from the coast.

[6 : 22] And as we travel inland from these two seaport cities of Ephesus and Smyrna, as we travel inland, we're ascending all the time. We're ascending to over 1,000 feet above sea level.

And that's because the city of Pergamos, as you can see, was situated in the highlands of modern-day Turkey. It was Asia then, but it's now called Turkey. But the city itself, the city of Pergamos itself, was what you would call an acropolis.

An acropolis. The word acropolis comes from two Greek words, acro meaning summit and polis meaning city. So it's a summit city.

It's a city built upon a hill. And so Pergamos was this city that was placed and perched upon a high hill. In fact, the name Pergamos, it means elevation or height.

So it's a high city. It's a city perched and placed upon a high hill. And it's emphasising to us, as we go up to Pergamos, you could see, there's this incline. For everyone who travelled to the city of Pergamos, there was this great incline towards it.

[7 : 38] Because there were five features, which we'll see in a moment, that were on the top of this great incline. But, you know, the ironic thing about this city was that, on the one hand, it was very stylish and very sophisticated.

Like Smyrna, Pergamos had beautiful Greek architecture. And it was also the centre for Greek culture and Greek education. Pergamos had boasted of one of the largest libraries in the ancient world, with over 200,000 books in its library.

Undoubtedly, you could say that the people of Pergamos were academic. They were educated people. They were bright and, they were a bright and brainy bunch, you would say.

They were an intelligent and intellectual people. But, of course, that didn't mean they were wise. Their intelligence didn't mean they were wise. Because it was their lack of wisdom which led to large sums of money being blown on building temples to their Greek gods and their goddesses, who were situated and perched in place in this city.

In fact, within one mile in the city of Pergamos, only one mile, that one mile was home to five temples.

[9 : 02] The oldest was the temple dedicated to the goddess Athena. Then you would go a quarter of a mile down the road and there was the temple to the Greek god Dionysus, the god of wine.

And Dionysus, he was helpful if you wanted to grow wine or if you wanted to get drunk. Then not far from that temple, there was the temple that was built by the Romans that was to honour the Caesar, divine Caesar Augustus.

And more than that, the people of Pergamos, they often confessed their creed just like those in Smyrna did. They confessed their creed, Kaiser Curios, Caesar is Lord.

And there was this dedication and this devotion to Caesar that created a problem for the people of Pergamos. It created this tension and the possibility of compromise for the Christians who were living in Pergamos.

But there were more temptations in Pergamos because there were more temples. There was also the temple of, and I try to pronounce this, Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing.

[10 : 10] In fact, it was because of Asclepius that Pergamos was home to the world's oldest hospital, to which people, they would come from all over the world. They would travel from all over the world to go up the incline to this place, perched at the top, to go to worship the god Asclepius, the god of healing, because they wanted help from him.

He was the god of medicine and healing. And you know, it's interesting, the symbol of Asclepius, if you've ever seen it, it's a staff and entwined around the staff is a snake.

You've probably seen that before. The symbol, it's a staff with this snake entwined around it. If you've seen it before, it's called the rod of Asclepius. And you often see it in medicine.

Maybe some doctors still wear it. The rod of Asclepius. But the fifth and final temple, which the people of Pergamos built, was the temple to Zeus, the Greek god of the sky.

He was the god of thunder and lightning. He was the king of all the gods. And as you expect, the altar to Zeus was the greatest and the grandest structure in Pergamos.

[11 : 27] It measured 36 metres high and 113 metres long. It was a massive structure. In fact, Zeus's altar, it was so expensive to build that the people of Pergamos, they had to stop working on one of their altars and put all the money into building Zeus's altar first.

And in fact, it took three generations to build Zeus's altar right at the top of this perched city of Pergamos. And when you see it, I've got a picture of it here, when you see it, when you see the altar of Zeus, you can see there that it resembles a giant throne.

You can almost see that it looks like a massive throne, the altar of Zeus. That's a replica, I think, in Berlin. There's a Pergamos museum in Berlin.

And Zeus's altar was known to many Christians in the first century as the seat of Satan or Satan's throne or the place where Satan dwells.

Which is why Jesus says there in 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.

[12 : 56] You know, Jesus gives the Christians in the church at Pergamos, he gives them a word of commendation there in verse 13. He commends them for their faithfulness in the midst of a faithless society.

He commends them for the Christian perseverance among all these idols, among all these temples and altars and all these idolatrous people in Pergamos. He commends them for their perseverance.

And he also commends them for their steadfastness despite living where Satan dwells. And notice there, Jesus doesn't say to the Christians in the church at Pergamos, he doesn't say to them, well, you live where Satan dwells, you live where Satan's throne is, you need to get out of there.

He doesn't say that to them. Jesus doesn't say to the Christians in Pergamos, he doesn't say, you need to get a job somewhere else, you need to move to a more Christian city, you need to put your kids into a Christian school.

No, Jesus says, I know where you live. And they are the most comforting words to any Christian in a godless society.

[14 : 03] I know where you live. I know that you live where Satan's throne is. I know that you live where Satan dwells. I know that you live in Satan's city.

That doesn't mean you should leave your job or move to a more Christian community. No, Jesus is reminding the church in Pergamos, stay there, stand firm, and stay focused in Satan's city.

Stay there, stand firm, and stay focused in Satan's city. Stay where you are and continue to be a faithful Christian witness in your community where you are, even though you live where Satan dwells.

Stay there, stand firm, stay focused in Satan's city. I know where you dwell, he says. What comforting words. I know where you dwell.

It's 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.

[15 : 19] As you can see there, Jesus mentions Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you. And he mentions Antipas because Antipas was the pastor.

He was the pastor of the church at Pergamos. We'll go back to this screen. So Antipas was the pastor of the church at Pergamos. And you know, I find it amazing. While the Apostle John was the pastor of the church in Ephesus, and Polycarp, whom we mentioned last week, he was the pastor of the church in Smyrna, then Antipas was also the pastor of the church in Pergamos.

And the Lord had his pastors in particular places. And he had his pastors in particular places to serve his people. And nothing has changed. Nothing has changed in 2,000 years.

The Lord still has his pastors in particular places to serve his people. But like Polycarp, whom we mentioned last week, he was burned at the stake in Smyrna for refusing to renounce Christ.

Antipas was burned at the stake as well. He was burned at the stake for casting out demons in the place where Satan dwells. And that's why Jesus gives that word of commendation.

[16:39] You hold fast my name. You did not deny my faith. Even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

But of course, Jesus doesn't stop there. And he doesn't stop there because there were Christians in Pergamos who were struggling. They were struggling to stay there and stand firm and stay focused in Satan's city.

They were struggling, struggling to be a faithful Christian witness in their community. And because of their struggle, it led to them compromising their Christianity.

They compromised their Christianity, which is why Jesus goes on to give a word of correction.

That's what we see secondly. A word of commendation, verses 12 and 13.

And then a word of correction in 14 to 17. A word of correction. Jesus says, verse 14, I have a few things against you.

[17:47] 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. In the beginning of verse 16, therefore, says Jesus, repent.

In his brilliant commentary on the book of Revelation, if you want a commentary to go along with this, it's Joel Beakey's commentary. Joel Beakey writes, he says, A ship at sea is where it was designed to be, in the water.

But once water starts to get into the ship, if no action is taken, it's only a matter of time before the ship sinks. Although the ship is meant to be in the water, the water is not meant to be in the ship.

As Christians, we are meant to be in the world, but the world is not meant to be in us. The church at Pergamos, he says, had sailed through troubled waters and withstood many storms.

[18:56] But through lack of diligence, her hull had been perforated and she was beginning to take on water. Pergamos had gone through turbulent times.

The waves of persecution had crashed over this church with deadly force. And our Lord initially commends the church for staying afloat and keeping on her course under such adverse conditions. But then he warns her that he has found a leak in her sides and the spirit of the world is seeping in. And that's what Jesus is referring to there when he mentions the doctrine or the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

He says, I have a few things against you. And what he has against them is the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Balaam was this Old Testament prophet.

He's mentioned in the book of Numbers. He was an Old Testament prophet who once faithfully and fearlessly proclaimed the message of the Lord even against this man Balak because Balak was the king of Moab.

[20:03] Sadly, over time, you could say that Balaam started taking on water. Balaam compromised his position as a prophet of the Lord where he actually conspired with Balak, the king of Moab, to corrupt the people of Israel and to encourage the people of Israel to compromise their commitment to the Lord.

And Balaam and Balak, they succeeded because the people of Israel, God's holy people, they conceded to the world and they compromised their commitment to the Lord because as Jesus says there, they began eating food sacrificed to idols and practicing sexual immorality.

That's why Jesus says in verse 14, 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.

But as you see, it's not only the doctrine of Balaam that was a danger to the church, the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was also a danger to the church which is why Jesus goes on in verse 15, so also, so also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Now, we read earlier when we were looking, just reading through it, the church in Ephesus. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans was present in the church in Ephesus, but the Ephesians were told they hated the doctrine of the Nicolaitans because the doctrine of the Nicolaitans was love God and live as you please.

[21 : 49] As long as you love God and come to church, you can live the rest of the week as you please. As long as you do your Sunday thing, you can live the other six days of the week any way you like.

But even though the Christians in Ephesus excluded the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, we see that some of the Christians a few miles up the road in Pergamos, they had embraced the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.

They had succumbed to the attraction and the appeal of the world. They were loving God and living as they pleased to the point that they had conceded to the world and compromised their Christianity.

And you know, if we were to use Joel Beakey's ship analogy again, the ship was taking on water and sinking only because it had run aground. It had run aground on the rocks of confusion and compromise.

But the ship had only run aground because it had gone off course. And as every captain of a ship knows, if you are off course even by one degree, it might not look much at the beginning, but in no time at all, as the ship keeps sailing, it's further and further from the course that it's meant to be on.

[23 : 11] And that was true of the church in Pergamos in the first century and it's true of the church in Scotland in the 21st century. Many would say that the ship in Scotland is sinking because years ago she moved off course.

She moved off course and now she is heading to the rocks to run aground on the rocks of confusion and compromise. And that's why Jesus says to the church, not only the church in the first century, but the church in every century, he says to the church there in verse 16, therefore, this is the response you need to have.

therefore, repent. Therefore, repent. In other words, recalibrate your compass, realign your course and readjust your direction away from these rocks of compromise and confusion.

Recalibrate your compass, he says. But how do we do that? Well, Jesus says that we need to go back, as he says there in verse 12, to the sharp two-edged sword, which, as you know, is the word of God.

It's the only rule to direct us. It's the only compass for life. Our only compass in life and in death on how we may glorify God and enjoy him forever is the word of God.

[24 : 39] The Bible tells us the word of God is living and active. It is a sharp two-edged sword. So if we're conceding to the world in whatever way it may be, what if we're compromising our Christianity in a way that we maybe didn't do before, maybe even five or six years ago?

Something Joel Beakey says in his commentary as well. He says, you know, you should ask yourself, do you do things now that you would never have thought of doing five years ago? Have you moved off course?

Have you shifted a degree? You know, if we're conceding to the world, if we're compromising our Christianity, then Jesus is telling us we need to recalibrate our compass. We need to realign our course.

We need to readjust our direction to follow him. To follow him. Because, you know, our standard to follow, our standard isn't the standard of Satan or the standard of the saints.

Our standard is the standard of the Saviour. And our example to follow isn't the example of the world or even the example of the Christian. Our example is Christ. That's what the word Christian means.

[25 : 54] It means follower of Christ. We don't follow the world. We don't follow the Christian. We follow Christ. We follow Christ. We are Christians.

We're followers of Christ. And, you know, we have at home, we have a daily reading book that we read with the boys every morning before they go to school. It's an old book, I think.

Alison had it when she was wee. It's called WWJD. What Would Jesus Do? WWJD. I think when I was first converted of 18, used to get bracelets and would have the letter shown at WWJD.

What would Jesus do? And, you know, in many ways, it's so simple. It's a reminder to us of how we should live our lives as Christians, as followers of Christ.

We should ask ourselves in every situation, in every place that we go to, in every conversation we have, well, what would Jesus do? What would Jesus do? And that's what really challenges you.

[26 : 57] How would Jesus be in this situation? And, well, yeah, we faint and fail at every turn, but it's always to bring us back to the course that we're meant to be sailing on.

What would Jesus do? And so Jesus gives a word of commendation and a word of correction. And he says, there in verse 17, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. That's Jesus' call to respond. We're to respond to his message. We're to respond, we're to hear, because how you hear affects your heart.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. But this evening, as we consider the church in Pergamos, I want to conclude with the time we have, I want to conclude with three Puritans.

So we have the church in Pergamos, but I want to conclude with three Puritans. The first Puritan is Thomas Brooks. Thomas Brooks wrote a book called Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices. [28 : 09] Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices. It's a little, you can get it as a little Puritan paperback. It's a brilliant book. Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices.

And it's a great book because it details and it describes many of the ways in which the devil attacks God's people, which is often why he suddenly attacks our head or our heart or our hands.

That's why we need to safeguard against all the cunning and the clever attacks of the evil one. And in his book, Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices, that's what Thomas Brooks gives to us.

The book does what it says on the cover. He gives to us precious remedies against Satan's devices. And we need that because we dwell where Satan.

We live where Satan lives. That's what Jesus says. I know where you live. I know where you dwell. It's where Satan dwells.

[29 : 13] And that's what we need to remember. We are in a place that is opposed to the gospel. There are obstacles to the gospel. That's why we need to know precious remedies against Satan's devices.

Because like the church in Pergamos, where Satan's throne was, we need to remember that Satan is the God of this world who blinds the minds of unbelievers. And we need to stand firm and stay focused as a Christian witness in our community.

The second Puritan I want to mention is the well-known hymn writer John Owen. Not John Owen, Peter. Sorry. I know you got excited there. John Newton. As you know, John Newton, he wrote the famous hymn, Amazing Grace.

But he was also a minister in the Church of England. And for a time, John Newton, he served the Lord in what he described as the sinful city of London. The sinful city of London.

And in his works, John Owen, he wrote, this is what he wrote, he said, London appears to me like a sea wherein most are tossed by storms and many suffer shipwreck. Therefore, I need London grace to live in London.

[30 : 30] I need London grace to live in London. What John Newton meant by London grace is the grace of God to live as a faithful Christian witness in his community in London.

I need London grace to live in London. And you know, if John Newton needed London grace to live in London, we need Barvis grace to live in Barvis.

We need Barvis grace to live as a faithful Christian witness in the community of Barvis or Borg or Braga.

The last Puritan I want us to conclude with is our good friend John Bunyan. As you know, John Bunyan, he wrote the timeless classic The Pilgrim's Progress, which is an allegorical story of Christian's journey from the city of destruction all the way to the celestial city.

And like the church in Pergamos and the challenge of compromise, Christian faced the same challenge. Because you remember that just after Christian had been helped out to the Slough of Despond, he met a man called Mr. Worley Wiseman.

[31 : 45] Mr. Worley Wiseman, he was from the town of carnal policy. And like the people of Pergamos, you could say, who persuaded Christians to compromise their Christianity, Mr. Worley Wiseman, he persuaded Christian who had the burden upon his back.

He persuaded Christian to divert his course from the path that led to the celestial city. And he diverted him into another path to look for Mr. Legality in the town or the village of morality.

And of course, it wasn't long until Christian realised that he had made a mistake and he had got himself into a right old mess. But thankfully, when you read the narrative, Evangelist, that good man who pointed him in the right direction, Evangelist appears to refocus and redirect and recalibrate Christian onto the narrow path.

And Evangelist lovingly said to Christian, and you know, I love what he says, you have forsaken the way that is good to tread forbidden paths, yet the man at the gate will still receive you.

You know, my friend, the church in Pergamos, it teaches us not to concede, not to compromise our Christianity, but to stay firm, to stand firm and to stay focused in our faithful Christian witness within our community, to keep praying every day for Barvis Grace to live in the community of Barvis.

[33 : 35] So stand firm, stay focused as a faithful Christian witness. May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee for thy word, thy word that always challenges us.

It is, as Jesus described, a sharp two-edged sword and that it pierces our heart often. It reminds us of what we are not, that we are not faithful, we are not fearless as we ought to be, but we bless and praise thee that we have a faithful saviour who upholds and supports us, who strengthens us and sustains us, and Lord, we pray that we would not concede our Christianity, that we would not compromise the Christ we love and the Christ who gave himself for us, but that we would stay focused, that we would stand firm, that we would stand firm upon the rock that is Christ Jesus, realising that there is nothing we can do without him or that without him we can do nothing but with him all things are possible.

Bless us, Lord, we pray, help us to stay the course, help us to persevere to the end, help us to keep looking towards that final river where the celestial city lies, that we would keep going on in the help and strength of the Lord.

Keep us, Lord, we pray, for we know that we cannot keep ourselves and do us good we ask, for we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. Now we're going to bring our service to a conclusion. We're going to sing in Psalm 89. Psalm 89 in the Scottish Psalter, we're singing from the beginning down to the verse marked 5. Psalm 89 from the beginning.

[35 : 37] God's mercies I will ever sing and with my mouth I shall thy faithfulness make to be known to generations all. For mercy shall be built, said I, forever to endure thy faithfulness even in the heavens thou wilt establish sure.

Down to the verse marked 5 of Psalm 89 to God's praise. God's mercies thy will ever sing and with my mouth I shall thy faithfulness make to be known to generations where it sheds on.

For mercy shall be built said I forever to endure thy faithfulness deep in the heavens thou wilt establish here.

I with my chosen one I've made a covenant I have come not graciously and to my servant whom I love to David sworn have I that thy thy seed established shall forever to remain and will to generations where it

The heaven shall express, And in the congregation, Of saints thy faithfulness.

[38 : 42] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, The love of God the Father, And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, Be with you all, Never and forevermore. Amen.