

Stay True in the Shadow of Satan's Throne (Pergamum)

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[0 : 00] Well, I said that we would loop back to Pergamum at some point in our series, and here we are tonight. We don't need to worry too much about the order of these letters. The order they're in is probably because that is the order that they came on the delivery route as a very trusted courier walked or rode around the churches of first century Turkey delivering this scroll to the various messengers. Remember, Revelation in the form of a scroll is on its way around the churches of Asia Minor. So Pergamum was the third stop, but in our case it's had to be re-delivered.

Tonight we're making a detour, but let me assure you that that doesn't change the context or our understanding of this letter, because ultimately while these letters were written to the seven churches back then, these messages do speak to Christ's church in every time and place. The risen, reigning Lord Jesus has revealed to John in a vision the truth that lies behind the history and the circumstances that this church is in, and he's had John write down what he's seen and heard and send it to the seven churches of Asia. And at the start of this letter, we find Jesus addressing the churches one by one and telling the Christians in each of these cities how the book of Revelation is meant to cash out in their context. Not every church is in the same condition or in the same circumstances, but all are under pressure to compromise the faith and to go the world's way. And we live under that same pressure today as God's church in Scotland, maybe not in quite the same way or from quite the same sources as we find in these letters, but it's there. And tonight we're going to hear Jesus speak to a church where that pressure is coming from both the outside and the inside. There's a lot going on in Pergamum, but Jesus introduces himself to them as him who has the sharp double-edged sword.

If you remember back in chapter one, that sword was shown coming from his mouth. He refers to that in verse 16, the sword of my mouth. So the sword is a picture of his words. If we say that somebody has a forked tongue, we know that we're not speaking about a physical defect, but a spiritual one.

They're deceptive, that their words have no integrity. So when Jesus says that he has a sharp double-edged sword coming from his mouth, he's not talking about his physical appearance. He's saying, my words are powerful. They cut to the heart. And this is the one that we are listening to tonight, brothers and sisters. He speaks the very word of God. He is the word of God. And like a surgeon, he has come to cut us open so that he can heal us inside. We wouldn't want a surgeon operating on us who worked with blunt instruments, would we? So we do not want a God who speaks with weak and powerless words. His words were strong enough to sustain a church like Pergamum. They're sharp enough to correct a church like Pergamum. And so they are strong and sharp enough for us to live by tonight.

[3 : 45] So then let us hear and take to heart what he has to say to us. Firstly, he says, trust him with your life and your death. Now, as with the other churches, Jesus begins by telling them what he knows. Most of the other churches, he says, I know your deeds. Here he begins, look, I know where you live. He's not simply claiming to know their address, but that he understands the situation on the ground. And not because he's read the local paper, but because he is present in his church there. He brings back that image again from chapter one of the Lord Jesus Christ as the priest in the heavenly tabernacle, remember? Walking among the lampstands, present, working in his church. He wants us to know that he is with us. And that means that he is with us here, right where we are. We don't have to explain to

Jesus what Aberdeen is like or the Northeast. He has a home here. He has more than one. What a great thing it was to join with brothers and sisters of other churches this morning. He is present. We

don't have to tell him what the culture of our workplace is or what it's like to be a student at Aberdeen or at RGU or how our family and our household works. He knows where we live. You wonder, do we think that the church is all that he thinks or that he cares about? He only has eyes for his church, but he has his eyes on everything to do with where we live. We should tell him in prayer what our lives are like.

We should unburden ourselves to him, but let us not imagine for a moment that we are filling him in on things that he does not already know. He knows far more than we do about where we live. Because notice what he knows about where these Christians live. I know where you live, where Satan has his throne. Now, I'm not sure if the church will have been aware that they shared their living space with Satan. I'm not sure Jesus is speaking about a physical throne because he's speaking about spiritual realities. Under the skin of Pergamon, we find Satan's throne. At the end of verse 13, he says it's where Satan lives. Now, in what sense? It's hard to know. We've touched on the spiritual element of everyday life in each of these cities, how much of life centered on idol worship. But Pergamon had an impressively long list of what we today would call places of worship. It boasted the very first temple to the worship of the Roman emperor in the region. The rest of the book of Revelation certainly portrays Rome as a servant of demonic power. So that could be what Jesus calls Satan's throne. There was also an altar for the worship of Jews, temples for serving Athena, Dionysius, Demeter. So not just one patron god, but a whole pantheon of false gods that people would have competed to serve in their respective temples. And interestingly, there was also, archaeologists say, a whole campus outside of the city for the worship of Asclepius, who intriguingly shared a symbol with Satan. That is, a serpent. If you've had any contact recently with paramedics, you'll know that.

[7 : 28] Asclepius was worshipped as a god of health. In some health services, you'll still see a logo of a stick with a snake wrapped around it. Next time you'll know that's the rod of Asclepius.

It's not to tell you there's anything satanic about our health services. But that there's no shortage of options for what Jesus might have in view when he speaks of Satan's throne, which I guess tells the story in itself, doesn't it? But how did that impact the church's daily life? Well, this is, in a sense, the center of Satan's operations. We see throughout Revelation, as we have in these letters, that his key strategies, if you like, are to deceive the church into believing lies, to tempt the church to compromise with the culture, and to slander and attack God's people with force.

And it's clear that the church in Pergamon was in the grip of all three operations. It should be no surprise to this church to hear that they are living under the shadow of their enemies throne.

That makes so much sense, you can hear them saying. Evil has the upper hand in our city, and now we understand why. Because our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. And as terrifying as that thought is, how wonderful is it to know that Jesus understands where we live, the spiritual landscape of where we are. And now we see where they live. Aren't we astonished at how they live? Against the dark backdrop, here Jesus is well done to the church in the rest of verse 13. Yet ye remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city where Satan lives. So they have stuck with Jesus in that city, even when one of them was put to death for being a faithful witness. We don't know anything about this Antipas apart from his name, who he was, how old he was, what family he had. But the Lord Jesus knows who he was. And what an amazing thing that his name is recorded in scripture. Just think all those big and powerful temples and shrines are today rubble. But here we are 2,000 years later still remembering one man's death in the name of Jesus. So who won in Pergamum? Of course, we have the benefit of hindsight, but these guys were living through it. The temples were still in their full glory. The cobblestones of their street were stained with the blood of their brother and their friend.

Yet they stayed true to Jesus and didn't give up their faith in him. Something worth doing if you ever visit St. Andrews is walking along by the castle until you get to a point in the road where the cobbles spell out the letters GW. They mark the spot where George Wishart was hung and then burned to death in 1546. He was one of the earliest preachers of the Reformation in Scotland. He was held in the castle and tried for heresy and then put to death on that spot.

[11 : 05] And nearly 500 years later, that once mighty castle was a ruin. But people still stop and stand by those initials and remember the faithful witness of that man to Jesus.

If you go stand there and learn this lesson, at the time it did not feel like Jesus was winning. But 500 years later, 2,000 years later, on from these martyrs and we see that in fact he was.

Jesus was winning through the faithful witness of his people who loved not their lives even unto death. Brothers and sisters, we don't know how the next 10 or 20 years are going to change for us here.

Almost certainly it's going to get tougher to live and witness for Jesus in Scotland. But what we do know is that even if it costs us our reputation, our finances, our property, our freedom, perhaps one day even our lives, we know that Jesus gets the last word.

However hard it gets, he will never leave us or forsake us. So staying true to him and being a faithful witness for him is the only way to win.

[12:29] Not perhaps in our lifetime, but in the long term and in eternity. So trust him with your life and your death, says Jesus.

And secondly, turn from teaching that leads to compromise. Verse 14, Jesus goes on, Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. Now as in most of the other letters, there are areas where the church is strong and where the church is weak.

It said at the start, the church in Pergamon was under pressure from the outside and the inside. We've seen that they are withstanding persecution from the outside, but they are tolerating false teaching from the inside.

There is some among you, he says, you hold to the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin, so that they food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So two types of false teaching. One, we have an Old Testament foothold for. The other, we really know nothing about.

[13:37] It's thought that they would both lead to the same kind of compromise, though perhaps they were both coming from different directions, maybe different kinds of teaching. So what was the teaching?

Well, Balaam was a pagan prophet in the Old Testament, not a person in the church. You can read about it in Numbers. We read a bit of the story just now.

And Balak was a pagan king who basically hired this Balaam to come and curse God's people.

Now, to his credit, as we heard, Balaam said, I can't say anything apart from what the Lord gives me to say.

And that's what he does. He opens his mouth to curse God's people and finds that he can only bless them. This inevitably frustrates Balak, the king, who gets him to do it three times over before finally giving up with no success.

But we find out later in chapter 31 that Balaam then suggested quietly to the king that they drop the spiritual stuff and go for a more physical approach.

[14:46] So Balak then arranged for women from his country to be sent into the Israelite camp to seduce the Israelite men into sexual immorality with the purpose ultimately of leading them into idol worship.

And this worked. We read in Numbers 25, So that kind of teaching, what could it have been in the church in Pergamon?

Perhaps that having a pagan girlfriend would be a good way of balancing being a Christian with living in a pagan world. You could still have one foot in the church, couldn't you?

But the other foot in the world. Or perhaps they were teaching that it didn't really matter what you did with your body as long as you said your prayers and came along on a Sunday.

What and where you ate, who you slept with, was by the by. If Jesus has saved your soul.

Whatever it was, the teaching gave a license to compromise.

[16:03] It said okay to softening our faithfulness to God's word or putting conditions on our obedience. I'll follow his will as long as it doesn't make me different.

As long as it doesn't lose me friends. As long as I feel like it. Following Jesus in Pergamon was extremely costly.

So any so-called Christian teaching that reduced the cost would have gained a few followers. You can be a bargain bin Christian. Cheap grace.

Cut price Christianity. Does that idea have appeal in the church today? Well just as some in the church then went after the teaching of people like Balaam or the Nicolaitans, so some in the church today will be tempted by ideas that legitimize compromise.

It might not have a name or a founder, but it might be as simple as only going out with other Christians is so outdated. Or society is so hyper-sexualized that it's impossible to live today without getting involved.

[17:20] Or what I do with my body doesn't really affect my spiritual life. Friends, it's all been said before. By the Israelites in the desert, by the first century church, to Christians today, it's not me.

You wonder if there's ever been a time that it's been harder to be a Christian, but we're not a million miles from Pergamum, are we? Sexual sin and idol worship went together then and still do today. You trust that we don't go to the pagan temple, but what we do with our bodies in bed shows what we are worshiping in our hearts. We cannot worship the true God by disobeying his word with our bodies.

And we all have the seeds of that sin or that tendency to compromise within us, and some of us it may have taken root and sprouted. But to the whole church, the Lord Jesus says, verse 16, repent therefore.

It's a military command. Turn on the spot. Go in the opposite direction. There is no room for compromise in the Christian life, says Jesus. Otherwise, he says, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

[18:40] That sharp and double-edged sword we thought about earlier, it will come against his church, he says. Certainly a picture of judgment.

But because he says fight against rather than destroy, and because it's the sword of his mouth that is his word, I would see this as a kind of preemptive strike.

So not a final judgment, but nonetheless a fierce judgment. If compromise sets in, you can well imagine a sermon like this, feeling like somebody's swinging a sword at you.

But Jesus says it's him swinging the sword, and it's actually because he's fighting for your life.

That's why it's the sword of his mouth, not the sword in his hand.

He wants the heart and life of these Christians back with him. It's a great truth for us when we are seduced by sin to know that Jesus will never, ever let those who truly belong to him go from him.

[19:48] He will fight for our hearts. But it's also something, brothers and sisters, that we do not want to test him on. Because at a certain point, it will hurt when he speaks to us.

And it will sting to hear his word. Do you not go down that path? If you are going halves with Jesus tonight, turn quickly and repent now.

And don't let it get to that point. Go wholeheartedly in his way. And finally, says Jesus, take hold of a new identity.

To the one who is victorious, says Jesus, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

Again, as we've seen in other letters, it's a surprising way to speak about our ultimate victory in Christ, isn't it? Hidden manna, a white stone, a new name.

[20:50] What's it all about? Well, manna takes us back again to the Old Testament. And that same journey of the Israelites through the desert, God fed them each day with bread from heaven.

It was called manna, which sounds like the Hebrew way of saying, what is it? It had no earthly origin. They didn't really know what it was, but it came each morning and it fed them day by day in the wilderness.

It was a saving grace from God because they couldn't possibly have carried on without it. It's the only food they had. And I guess for the church in Pergamum, they needed to know that there was going to be something to sustain them on the way as they walked through these incredible pressures.

When Jesus says, I do have something up my sleeve, there is miracle bread for you. It's hidden now, but it is for you and you will have it as long as you persevere.

For as long as you keep going, there will be provision. In an immediate sense, that would have resonated where they live. They're being pushed towards joining idol feasts of sacrificed meat in the pagan temples.

[22:05] Well, now Jesus offers them a different kind of feast if they resist. And if the history of Balaam teaches them and us not to compromise, well, the history of the manna in the wilderness teaches them and us that God provides super abundantly for us to carry on when we feel like we just can't.

One more day. One more day. And what will Jesus give? One more day of provision. One more day.

I think that resonates not just in Pergamum, but for every church in every age, not least because in John's gospel, Jesus says he himself is the bread that came down from heaven to feed his people. I am the bread of life, he said. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Is Jesus enough to keep us through all the pressures outside and inside that push us away from him? He promises that he is and that he gives himself super abundantly to those who trust in him.

[23 : 18] That is a promise that we can take hold of tonight. that when we put our trust in Jesus, he will give us everything that we need to stick with him to the very end.

And the end will bring even better things. A white stone with a new name written on it. Now, there's lots of theories about what that white stone could be and the ways that white stones were used back in the day.

The most compelling option, though not the only one, I think, in the context of this letter is the use of a white stone as an invitation. My ESV study Bible reliably informs me that a white stone was given to the victors at games in the arena, which they would then present at a door to get them into a banquet following the games.

So Jesus says, to those who are victorious, a white stone will be given with a new name written on it, a personal invitation to a heavenly banquet.

You might go hungry now and you might get hurt now, but if you come through it, you will be given entrance to the feast of heaven. He will put on a spread, brothers and sisters, that is never finished.

[24 : 36] And that invitation and welcome is given to you personally, your name written on it, but your new name. Now again, we need to be careful with things that aren't particularly clear, but like last week, we understand that a new name speaks of a new identity.

It will be you, but it will be you as you have never known yourself. It will be you, but a new you. A you free, not only from the penalty and the power of sin, but free also from the presence of sin.

A you that will never again grieve or hurt or cry, not because you can't, but because you'll never need to.

When you sit down at that feast, you will, in a sense, be a whole new person, victorious, renewed.

That's what a new name is getting at, a new identity, a new welcome, a new fullness that awaits those who stick with Jesus to the end.

And that newness bleeds back from the future into the present. You heard at holiday club this week, all the kids learn a memory verse. Do you remember what it was?

[25 : 54] I'm not going to ask you. 2 Corinthians 5, 17, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come.

The old is gone, the new is here. The new you starts now in Jesus, so take hold of your new identity in Christ. Receive that invitation.

Hunger for that heavenly feast. See yourself sitting at that table. For those who overcome the pressures here and now, without and within, in Jesus' strength and in his name, well, we will see that new identity there and then as never before as we sit at the feast of heaven.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Let's pray together. God, our Father, we thank you and we praise you that you never let us go hungry.

Lord, you never let us thirst. Lord, you have provided Jesus to be our fullness and he is laid out available to us in the gospel.

[27 : 22] Father, we thank you that as we go through life and we face pressures, Lord, as we follow Jesus and we are tempted and pressured to conform to this world, we thank you that you have provided more than enough in him to keep us going.

So, Lord, keep us going this week, we pray. Lord, when each day feels like a struggle, we pray that you would provide for us. Lord, we pray that when we gather again next Sunday that we would be full of thanks to you for your faithfulness for having kept us the past week.

Lord, keep us, we pray, to that wonderful feast in heaven. We thank you for that great promise of your word that a day will come when we will eat with Christ in his kingdom.

Lord, set our hearts, we pray, on that day. Let us hope and long for it and let that hope keep us going, Lord, in the day that we live. For we pray it in Jesus' name.

Amen.