

# Pergamum -- A Church Compromised

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- [ 0 : 00 ] We're going to be turning now to our Bibles. Paul has been leading us through these letters to the churches from the risen Lord Jesus at the beginning of the revelation of John. You'll find that very at the end of the Bible, the last book of the New Testament.
- And we're going to read this morning together a short section in Revelation chapter 2, beginning at verse 12, the letter or the word to the church in Pergamum.
- So Revelation chapter 2 and verse 12. And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.
- 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.
- [ 1 : 07 ] 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 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.
- Amen. May God bless to us. This is word. Well, good morning, folks. Please have your Bibles open and turn to that passage that Willie read for us earlier, Revelation 2.
- And looking particularly at verses 12 to 17, the letter to the church in Pergamon. Now, the city of Pergamon itself would have felt something of a pressure cooker for the Christians that received this letter back there in the first century.
- [ 2 : 32 ] The city itself was a place of real learning. It had a remarkable library for those days. Many, many volumes.
- It was a religious melting pot, home to several cults and gods. You had temples of Zeus, Athena, Dionysus and others. And in addition to the great learning, the religious melting pot, it was a real center of Roman influence.
- The Roman Empire had a real stronghold there in Pergamon. Now, the first temple of the imperial cult was built there in Pergamon. It was also home to the Roman government for the whole region of Asia.
- So it was a real sort of melting pot of all these different influences and pressures. Someone described, you know, if Ephesus, which we saw in the first letter, Ephesus was more like the New York of the time.
- Pergamon was its Washington, D.C. It was the hub of political influence. It's where all the key folk came to lobby and to press home and to influence the Roman authorities.

[ 3 : 43 ] Pergamon was something of a Washington, D.C. sort of place. Not easy, then, to be a Christian in that place at that time. You can imagine all the pressure coming from all the different angles on the church to bow to these various gods, to submit to the Roman imperial cult, to bow the knee to Rome.

And the comparisons with the church today, particularly here in Scotland, are striking, aren't they? Glasgow is a melting pot of religions.

Across the street, we have a massive temple for the Sikh community. Pluralism is the mantra of the day. Now, the government is hard at work to roll back Christian values and legislation.

Loud and influential voices are calling for the religious liberties so long taken for granted to be curtailed. That is what we see all around us, isn't it? We feel the pressure in very real ways to compromise, to keep our heads well below the parapet, to go quiet on matters of our faith.

We feel that pressure, don't we? And maybe that's how you're feeling now, but certainly in days to come, you will feel that pressure.

[ 5 : 02 ] Perhaps down the line, we will find ourselves in a very similar situation to the church here in Pergamon. As we've already seen in these letters to the churches, what Jesus says to these particular churches is of relevance to all churches and in every age.

So the things that we read about in these different letters may not be appropriate right now in this church, but one day they will be. And so we need to listen to these letters very carefully, even if we don't think, oh, that's relevant now, because one day it will be.

And there'll be churches in this city, around the world, that are facing these precise issues right now. And the same goes for all these letters. And so these things may be true for us today.

But if not today, then maybe in two years' time or ten years' time. So some of what we see in these letters need to be absorbed today and locked away for future days.

And some of what we'll see will be of immediate significance, I think. So three points we're going to think about in this letter to Pergamon. First, the first thing we see is the courage of the church commended.

[ 6 : 12 ] That's the first thing that is drawn to our attention, the courage of the church commended. Christ's church shines even where Satan dwells.

That's looking at verse 13 in particular. And this shows us something of the immense challenges the church is facing there. Look what it says, 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.

Jesus knows where his church dwells, and it is not comfortable territory, is it? Jesus describes Pergamon as where Satan's throne is.

Start of verse 13. At the end of the verse, it's where Satan dwells. Pergamon was a place, Jesus tells us, where Satan reigned and where he dwelt.

[ 7 : 16 ] He was at home in that place. Satan was in the midst of that city, wielding his influence. Perhaps you've seen posters around the city emerging in the last few days.

I saw two of them on the way in, and I think it's some sort of computer game called Diablo. But you see on the thing it says, welcome to hell, Glasgow. And there's a sort of satanic image there.

I've seen it all over the city. Now, that's advertising again, but perhaps it speaks more truth than it realizes. Because Satan is real. He really is at work in this world, and he really is at work in our city.

You don't need to look far, do you, to see evidences of his influence all around us. And likewise, here for Pergamon, Jesus sees exactly what is going on.

And that was a city where Satan reigned, where he dwelt. He was at home in that place. And this spiritual reality reflects in reality on the ground.

[ 8 : 21 ] As I mentioned, the city was home to several false religions and gods. It had a temple for emperor worship. You could see his influence in the city. And this would not have been a comfortable place at all for Christians who lived there.

Whose true king was Jesus, and whose real home was heavenly. But even given the difficulties of the situation there in Pergamon, Jesus commends them, doesn't he?

He says, yet, verse 13, yet ye hold fast my name. And he did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was killed among you.

Despite all that pressure, despite all that was going on in the city, they held fast. They did not deny Christ. They had faced the sort of persecution that the church in Smyrna, we saw last week, was anticipating and preparing for.

In that letter we saw, Jesus equipping his church for the suffering, the imprisonments, the death that were to come. But it seems as if those sorts of things had already happened in Pergamon. A man, we're told, named Antipas, was killed.

[ 9 : 37 ] He was a faithful witness to Christ. And he died for that witness. A man faithful unto death, who would receive the crown of life.

He was a man who refused to compromise. A man who refused to bow to the pagan gods of the season. A man who, through his death, maybe made a wife a widow.

And children fatherless. Jesus commends this church for their faithful courage, their stand to remain loyal with him.

This is a church with some backbone, right? One of their own has been killed for his faith. They held fast to Jesus' name.

They refused to name any other name as Lord. Only Jesus is King. Only he can save. Only he is Lord. They had not denied their faith by yielding to the pressure of burning incense to the emperor.

[ 10 : 41 ] They refused to declare Caesar as Lord. They refused to do that. And how difficult would that have been? When everyone around you is saying, oh, just do it. Just say Caesar's Lord. You don't have to mean it in your heart. Just say it. Just utter the words.

Just bow the knee. That pressure was very real. They lived faithfully, even in the place where Satan reigned and dwelt.

You see, it is possible for Christ's church to live and to shine, even where Satan dwells. Just because a particular place is hard and difficult for the church or for an individual Christian does not mean that we should withdraw and go somewhere else.

No, it is possible for a church, for a Christian to shine, to shine brightly with witness to Jesus, even in difficult places.

It's difficult. It is difficult. It is difficult. It is difficult. It is difficult. But it's possible. You may be the only Christian in your office. You may be the only Christian in your team or your department.

[ 11 : 51 ] You may have to feel difficult questions from your neighbors. But it is possible to hold fast to Jesus in those places.

No doubt, the Christians there in Pergamon felt that pull. That pull to go to where the grass seemed greener and easier.

Where there'd be less hostility, less opposition. But how comforted they would have been to receive these words from the Lord Jesus. He knows, he sees.

He commends them for standing firm. It's a difficult, difficult city to live in. But Jesus commends them for standing firm. He knew exactly the hardships they had faced.

He knew exactly the pressures. And he commends them for standing firm. It is possible for a church to live and shine where Satan dwells.

[ 12 : 48 ] It is possible for us to live and shine in this city where there is so much darkness, so much opposition. We can stand firm.

And we must. Because the harvest is plentiful. There are many, many, many thousands in this city who need to hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we can stand firm. We can witness to Jesus. So Jesus commends the courage of the church. That's the first thing. Encourages them. There is a but, however.

Look at verse 14. But I have a few things against you. So Jesus sees everything. He sees their faithful witness.

But he also sees where they are struggling. He commends them for their faithfulness. He commends them. He encourages them. But he also seeks to correct. And our second point is this.

[ 13 : 48 ] The compromise within the church is condemned. The compromise within the church condemned. Christ's church must not tolerate compromise with the world.

This is verses 14 to 16. So yes, the church there in Pergamon had stood firm with regards to the overt and hostile persecution.

But it had failed to notice and arrest compromise within its own ranks. Worldly accommodation and compromise had gone unchecked in the lives of some within the church.

It does not seem to be the case. The whole church had gone off the rails. No. The whole church seems to be generally in the right direction.

But there are some within. Just notice what it says. I have this against you. You have some there. Verse 14. Who hold the teaching of Balaam.

[ 14 : 49 ] Who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel. So they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

So there are some within the midst of the church who are going off track. It's not the whole congregation. Not the whole church. But there are some.

Some amongst their number. A group within. A few individuals in the church have compromised. But the church as a whole has failed to really tackle it. They've not grasped the problem.

They've not dealt with it. But what is the issue? What is the nature of the teaching that was problematic? What is the teaching that seduced them?

In what way are they compromising? What's the nature of it? Well, we're told that these folk were holding to the teaching of Balaam. Who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.

[ 15 : 50 ] Now this episode is a reference back to the Old Testament. And you can read about it in the book of Numbers. And it takes place as God's people are travelling through the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

And at this point, they are near the nation of Moab. So they're in the wilderness, near this group of people called the Moabites. And the king of Moab, seeing this great group of Israelites on his doorstep, he seeks to destroy them.

He wants them gone, fearing that they had invaded his land. And so he recruited a pagan prophet named Balaam. And the king of Moab said to Balaam, Look, this is a problem for me.

I need you to call down curses. Upon these people. I want them gone. But that initial tactic of the prophet Balaam calling down curses, it failed.

And so he turned to tactic number two. And in the words of Jesus from our letter here in Pergamon, he put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.

[ 16 : 57 ] So Balaam is there. He's been recruited and paid for by the king of Moab to try and destroy the Israelites. The curses don't work.

Tactic number two, he managed to get the men of Israel to eat prohibited food and to enter into sexual sin. And he did this by sending in the daughters of Moab into the Israelite camp in order to seduce the men to sin.

So that is what happened. The women of Moab enticed the men of Israel into sexual immorality. You can read about it in Numbers 31. And it worked. It worked.

You see, it wasn't blatant untruth and false doctrine that got the men of Israel into trouble. It was the beautiful women of Moab. And likewise here in Pergamon, the church had stood firm against the obvious and powerful false religions of Rome and all the gods.

They'd even died for a refusal to compromise in those ways. But they had failed to notice and challenge a far more seductive threat that had crept in under the radar and unnoticed.

[ 18 : 16 ] A gentle and easy accommodation to some of the practices of the people around them had gone unchallenged. Perhaps they didn't want to be thought of as being too radical.

And so they embraced a bit of unassuming religious pluralism. They partook in some of the festivals. They enjoyed food, sacrificed to idols. They turned a blind eye to sexual immorality.

It would have been so very tempting for some there in Pergamon just to go along to the pagan feast, just to make your presence known. You're not actually there to take part, but you just want to be seen.

They were there at the annual festivities to Zeus, just to show face, to keep up appearances. What harm could be done just by being around? I know I don't believe in Zeus, so it doesn't really matter if I go to the feast.

Just what's more, it'll help the business along. It's good that I'm seen to be in the right places. It cultivates good relationships. What's the harm in that? And the message that some in the church in Pergamon would have been peddling was probably something along the lines of, it is possible, without being disloyal to Jesus, to maintain a peaceful coexistence with Rome.

[ 19 : 41 ] You can have both. You can enjoy the benefits of being involved with Rome and society, and you can remain loyal to Jesus. You can have both. You can serve both masters. Well, the fact of the matter is, as the Lord Jesus points out, that sometimes it is not possible to maintain loyalty with him and enjoy peace with the world.

Sometimes you've got to choose. In fact, what does Jesus say? If they don't repent, verse 16, if not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

When in Moab, God's people should not have lived like the Moabites did. That's the issue with the story of Balaam.

And when in the place where Satan reigns and dwells, a Christian should not live like the worldly people around them. So you and I need to consider what are the pressure points today and what areas are we tempted?

Am I tempted to go along with the world to enjoy peace with the world at the cost of loyalty to Jesus? That was the issue here. They were compromising.

[ 21 : 04 ] And particularly, we're told, it was in two areas of perennial temptation. And he names it here.

End of verse 14, idolatry and sexual immorality. Those are the two features of the teaching and the behavior that the Lord Jesus is calling out.

And those two things have really come together in our day and age, have they not? In the cult of pride. Idolatry and sexual immorality together in a powerful movement which is all around us.

The pride movement which has been celebrated this month. It represents the ultimate idolatry of self. It is a fundamental rejection of God and His ways.

It is all about self, isn't it? And self-definition. I have been reading a very helpful book about this. I think it is going to be our book of the month later on by Matthew Roberts.

[ 22 : 09 ] And he unpicks this for us in his book. And he quotes from a kids movie called The Smurfs. And it is actually, in kids movies, you find the essence of pride theology.

And all the stuff we are seeing around us is articulated in its most concentrated form in a really catchy way. But in The Smurfs, one of the characters says to his son, it doesn't matter where you come from, what matters is who you choose to be.

And that is the very essence of what we see around us. It is all about who you choose to be. And it is an intoxicating message. It is all around us. The call to be true to yourself, to define yourself, it is wrapped up in the most attractive packaging you could think of.

And Disney pumps it into your living room. Our desires, and in particular our sexual desires, are how the pride movement wishes for everyone to be defined.

That is who you are. Will we seek peace with the world on that issue? Will we keep our heads down, keep quiet, so as not to ruffle feathers?

[ 23 : 26 ] Or, do we really believe that pride ideology and the idolatry of so-called freedom are actually deeply destructive forces from which Christ brings rescue?

People need rescue from that ideology. Do we believe that? Are we prepared not only to challenge, but also to declare what is right and true when it comes to sex and relationships?

And that is difficult, is it not? Particularly this month. We feel that pressure all around us. But Matthew Roberts says this in his excellent book.

He says, it should go without saying that the church needs to be willing to suffer for this. The devotees of idols have never taken kindly to Christians proclaiming Christ as Lord instead of them.

And today's case, with the cult of pride, will prove no difference. If we proclaim the gospel wholeheartedly and do not hold back from declaring the emptiness of the idols of freedom and desire and the harm that their worship causes, then we can expect the opposition to be ferocious.

[ 24 : 43 ] Ferocious. So Jesus would say, hold the line. We proclaim Christ faithfully and we trust him for the outcome.

But it's not just being prepared to speak up on such issues. And that's hard. Are we, in terms of our own behavior within the church, compromising?

As the Lord Jesus looks at our lives, are we compromising? Now, of course, none of us are perfect. If we pause for a moment, if we're honest and realistic, there are, of course, areas where we fall short.

But the particular issues and focus here are of a serious nature. Jesus is comparing behavior amongst some of those in Pergamon with the events surrounding Balaam in Numbers, as we talked about.

Serious matters. Listen to these verses from Numbers 25. While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.

[ 25 : 53 ] These invited the people to the sacrifice of their gods, and the people bowed down to their gods. That is serious and blatant unfaithfulness.

They were literally bowing down to the gods of Moab. They were sleeping with the women of Moab. This is very in-your-face sort of stuff.

And similar things seem to have gone unchallenged there in Pergamon. Word maybe got around. So-and-so. He's been sleeping with some of the prostitutes at the Temple of Zeus.

He's even sacrificed at the altar, but we'd better not make a fuss. We don't want to make a scene about this. His business is going well. He contributes very generously to the church. Let's not ruffle the feathers.

Let's just keep it under the... Let's just keep it to the side. And we can think that sort of thing will never happen. We're a church that stands for the truth, aren't we? Well, so did the church in Pergamon.

[ 26 : 56 ] It doesn't take much for a church to turn a blind eye even to blatant sins like these. The lure of a quieter life is very tempting to take the easier path, not to challenge something.

That's always the easiest thing to do. So we need not only watch ourselves to be aware of where we are tempted to compromise. We need to be together watchful of one another.

And that is the issue that Jesus tackles, isn't it? He addresses the church and says, you have some there who follow teaching that leads into serious sin. And he's rebuking the church for its failure to tackle them.

It's a failure to hold each other to account. That's what Jesus is really putting his finger on. There are some in your congregation who are drifting and it's your problem for not dealing with it. You have not grasped that nettle.

You've not dealt with it. So it's not that we're to go around like Miss Marple trying to investigate things and looking for the slightest falling out of line.

[ 28 : 07 ] We're not to be heresy hunters like that. But when we do see a brother or a sister veering away from the Lord and his people, when we see them being seduced by the power of the world, compromising in certain ways, in particular regard to what we've seen here, sexuality and identity issues that are so pervasive, if we see someone beginning to drift in regard to those things, we don't just stand by.

We don't sweep it under the carpet. We don't pretend we haven't seen. No, we must speak to them, mustn't we? We must address them, urge them to repent.

But that takes courage. But Jesus does put steel on our spines, doesn't he? Because his warning is so severe.

He says, if you do not repent, verse 16, I will come to you soon and war against you with the sword of my mouth. And that is a terrifying prospect, is it not?

It is better for your wayward member, it's better for your wayward neighbour in the church, it is better to hear tough words from you than face the sword of Jesus' judgments.

[ 29 : 33 ] It is better. And we have a responsibility for each other, don't we? A responsibility to let the word of Christ dwell richly in us, that we would teach and admonish each other with all wisdom, and particularly for those in leadership.

Pray for those who lead this church, that they would not leave unchallenged, blatant compromise of the order that was going on here in Pergamum. Pray that the leadership here would not flinch from dealing with idolatry and sexual immorality in and amongst the church.

And maybe this warning, if this call to repent, maybe this is for you this morning. Perhaps you are compromising in these very ways.

And so if that's you, you must repent. You must repent. Repent today, this morning. Call out to the Lord for forgiveness. And he will not turn you away.

He will welcome you with open arms. But you must repent. Well, that's our second point. It's very sobering, isn't it? It's a stern warning.

[ 30 : 54 ] Compromise within church is condemned. But finally, Jesus sets forth the blessing for those who do repent from this compromise.

Look at verse 17. 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.

So here's our third point. The vibrant life of the church that conquers. The vibrant life of the church that conquers. See, Christ's church will not lose out because God will honour his people's faithfulness.

You will not lose out. By dealing with these issues of compromise, by remaining faithful, you will not lose out. Jesus promises real, abundant, everlasting life for those who seek to remain loyal to him, for those who conquer.

He promises good things for his people. He promises the good of his provision and care. He promises everlasting provision in contrast to the temporary trappings of this world, to the idolatries and sexual immoralities that only offer temporary satisfaction, that promise far more than they could ever deliver.

[ 32 : 21 ] Jesus, in contrast to that, promises things that will never fade, never run out. He promises them, verse 17, hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it.

Now those need some unpacking. What's he talking about? Why are these things so good? Well, the hidden manna, Jesus promises, is in complete contrast to the food some have eaten in Pergamum, the food that was offered and sacrificed to idols.

This is a different sort of food. The manna was provided to God's people during their wilderness wanderings. We've seen that in numbers already with the issue with Balaam.

But as God's people were wandering in the desert, God provided them with food, manna from heaven. And this hidden manna is a sustenance we can't see, it's hidden.

And Jesus is referring to a spiritual feeding and a feeding that his people won't enjoy in its fullness until the new creation begins with the marriage supper of the lamb that we read about in Revelation 19.

[ 33 : 32 ] Jesus promises food that is far more enduring and real than the idle food they're maybe enjoying there in Pergamum. Though they refuse to eat, that idle food, God will see to it that they don't go lacking.

See, God is no man's debtor. And those who refuse to compromise in this way, he will feed with real, everlasting sustenance. And that was his promise to the people then and today.

We know that what God offers us, what he promises you, is of infinitely more value than anything this world can provide. What he offers is of infinite longevity.

It lasts forever, beyond death into everlasting life. The things of this world, the things they provide are only temporary.

They're transitory. A momentary satisfaction which disappears and leaves a very sour bitter taste in your mouth. See, the things that were tempting those in Pergamum were just not worth it.



[ 34 : 45 ] That's what Jesus is saying. I'll give you something far better. And so too for us. The things that tempt us around now, they're not worth it, says Jesus.

Don't do it. They will not satisfy. I've got something far better, manner, that will never fade or disappoint. points. So Jesus offering something that we will enjoy forever in the new creation.

That's the thing with the manna, the hidden manna. The second thing he promises is this white stone. And that's a tricky one to really unpack.

If you read the commentators, they provide about a dozen possible explanations as to what this means. But here's the most compelling ones. I think this helps us a little bit. these white stones, they had various uses at the time.

They were sometimes tokens signifying a juror's vote in a trial. So if you presented the white stone, you were saying, I think the person on trial is innocent.

[ 35 : 51 ] So the white stone was acquittal. A black stone meant you were guilty. So the white stone symbolizes acquittal. They were also used as admission tickets to special events or as a token of honorable discharge from a gladiatorial combat contest.

Although also a sign of initiation into worship. So various uses, but it seems that the white stone was some sort of measure of acquittal, as a sign of acquittal, or a sign of entrance into a special event, a sign of innocence.

And so for Jesus saying to these Christians there in Pergamon, I'm going to give you the white stone. He's saying, whatever the world thinks about you, whatever those around you in Pergamon think about you, whatever your friends are saying on Instagram, whatever your boss thinks about your colleagues, whatever they may say or do, know this, that Jesus sees you, he knows, and he will give you the acquittal that really matters.

He will give you the white stone that really matters. Because at the end of the age, the only judgment of guilty or righteous that really matters is the one that Jesus will give you.

That is the day that matters. That is the judgment that really counts for all eternity. That's quite something, don't you think, for the Christians there in Pergamon to receive this message, whose faithfulness to Christ, would have meant exclusion from all the best parties, all the festivals, to be granted the white stone from Jesus.

[ 37 : 34 ] Well, that gives them access to the banquet, to end all banquets. That was something to cling to. He gives them a new name, a mark of genuine membership of Christ's new people, a guarantee of life everlasting in the new creation.

And he gives it to all who trust in Jesus. It's not earned through merit, but it's through humble acceptance, through penitent faith and humble trust. See, Jesus holds out here at the end of this letter, he holds out great and abundant blessings, vibrant life for his people, for those who refuse to compromise, who refuse to bow to the cult of pride, to those who hold fast to his name.

He holds out everlasting life. And these words are a great encouragement to us today, are they not? They would have been very encouraging to those in Pergamum, and they're encouraging to us.

We stand firm for Christ now, we will not lose out. We will not lose out. because there's more to this world than we see. There is an eternity to come, there is a judgment to come, and Christ will give us the white stone that on that day, that is the thing that counts, is it not?

Nothing in this world, nothing this world offers, can possibly be better than what Jesus holds out to us here. See that contrast. What Jesus offers is better by far.

[ 39 : 15 ] And so Jesus says to his church, don't compromise, rather conquer. Let me pray, and then we'll come to the Lord's table.

Father, we do thank you so much that you see everything. Lord, you see each one of us, you see our church, and Lord, you know, you know the stands that we've taken, you know where we have sought to be faithful, you see that.

But Lord, you also know where we are tempted to compromise, where we do feel the pull. Lord, please equip us to stand firm, help us to really trust your words here this morning, that you have something better, and so we wouldn't fall for the trappings of this world.

Help us as a congregation, as a church family, help us in our own families, in our own lives. Help us to conquer and not compromise.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.