

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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To the Church in Pergamum – Joss Bray

Last week we looked at the message in Revelation to the church in Smyrna.

It was all about being faithful in suffering and overcoming the enemy's plans and the accusers' testing. We reminded ourselves that we have been saved literally from a terrible future without God and that persevering brings a great reward.

Today we are looking at the message to the church at Pergamum – the next on the Roman trade route around Asia. Its ruins are situated in modern day Turkey near Bergama and it was at one point the capital of Roman Asia before Ephesus took over that role.

Even though the churches were geographically relatively close to each other, the messages to the seven churches are different, with different introductions, observations, commendations and criticisms – and this one is no different.

Here it is in Revelation 2 v12-17:

REV 2:12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ I know where you live--where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives.¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

Introduction

This message is not quite as straightforward as some of the others. There are things in it which are a mystery and do not have clear explanations. We will come on to them later.

So again, Jesus, who is the author of this message, introduces himself. This time he describes himself as having a sharp, double edged sword. This relates to John's vision of Jesus in Chapter 1 where he said "out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword". Remember in Hebrews 4 it says:

HEB 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

And in Ephesians 6:

EPH 6:17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The thing about a two edged sword is that it is incisive - it cuts wherever it goes. It is not something to hack with – but it gets straight to the point – as it were. The word of God should be used to get to the heart of the matter – it will penetrate deeply and reach parts that other words cannot reach.

If we take the word of God seriously – then we need to be prepared to be challenged on the deepest level when God points out things in our lives that are not what he wants – in fact that are sinful. They may be deeply hidden or entrenched – but a sharp double edged sword can cut even deeper and cut out what needs to be removed.

Jesus does not make any apologies or pull his punches about exposing sin – holiness is holiness – and anything less does not bring glory to God.

Pergamum

Being in Pergamum, the church was surrounded by overtly sinful practices. There was a famous temple to the Greek god Asclepius – who was the god of healing – and is symbolised by a snake – used today by the British Medical Association – among others. There were other massive temples, a stadium and a theatre, a huge forum and an amphitheatre. There was a lavish spa associated with the shrine to Asclepius and Pergamum was one of the most famous "healing" centres of the Roman world.

So there was lots going on there – mostly completely contrary to, and offensive to, Christian teaching – and the church was right in the middle of it.

REV 2:13 I know where you live--where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives.

It so much so, that Jesus describes it as where “Satan has his throne”. However – they remained true to the name of Jesus – they did not deny their faith in Jesus – they were prepared to die for Jesus. Perhaps the first Christian martyr in Asia was Antipas – Wikipedia says this:

“Antipas was martyred in about 92 AD by burning in a brazen bull-shaped altar for casting out demons worshiped by the local population.”

So that gives an indication of the intensity of the spiritual battle going on there – yet they remained in the faith despite all this.

However

There was a problem in the church. Jesus had a few things he wanted to get straight with them. He had praised them – but did not hold back from some strong admonition.

REV 2:14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

There were people in the church who – in summary – did not think that sinning was wrong because they had been saved by the grace of God. They believed that since grace was a free gift of God and all their sins were forgiven, then they could do what they liked. This was a big mistake.

Jesus was clear about these followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. They were in big trouble. He tells them to repent – literally to turn away from sin otherwise he personally will come and oppose them - and we can imagine who would win that contest. It is interesting to note that Jesus would not come against the church in this case but against those who hold to the teachings – i.e. they had personal responsibility for their actions.

Balaam and the Nicolaitans

Balaam can be found in Numbers 22-25. To cut a long story short, he wasn't from Israel but he was an "oracle" who would hire out his "prophetic" services for money. In Numbers, a Moabite king called Balak who was fighting the Israelites, wanted Balaam to curse Israel – for money of course. Balaam actually sought God about it and ended up blessing Israel not cursing them. However, it also appears from references later in Numbers and here in Revelation, that he advised the Moabite king how to compromise Israel and undermine it. This was by encouraging them to have sex with Moabite women and worshipping and sacrificing in their pagan temples. It was as simple as that – direct sins against God.

We met the Nicolaitans before in the message to the church in Ephesus where they resisted this sin. The Nicolaitans were the "because of grace, sin doesn't matter" brigade.

This issue is dealt with in Titus and Romans – as we have noted recently – but it bears repeating:

TIT 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹² It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,

RO 6:1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

It is clear that the grace of God – his unmerited favour on us – should spur us on to get rid of sin and ungodliness – not the other way round. However, the Nicolaitans message was convenient when combined with the Balaam practices, if they wanted to fit in more with the local community. Either this could be to avoid persecution or to just get on and live a "pleasure" filled life – or even – as an excuse to be able to "relate to the unsaved people".

I wonder whether this can be a temptation for us – among our non Christian friends and colleagues. We may let our standards lapse a bit, or go along with sin to "fit in" a bit better - we may even think this is a way to be in a better position to witness to people. I think this is a big mistake – and most of us are capable of making it to a greater or lesser degree. Here is the warning from Jesus:

REV 2:16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Remember, Jesus will come against people who do this himself – the sword of his mouth will do it – the word of God itself will convict us. The sword of the Spirit will penetrate and expose – and it will not be pleasant – but it will be necessary and beneficial in the end.

What is the Spirit saying to the churches?

REV 2:17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it

The spirit of Jesus is saying something to us – now the text says “churches” – that’s us. If we overcome these sins then there are two promises:

1. Jesus will give us some of the hidden manna
2. Jesus will give us a white stone with a new name written on it.

We can try to get a sense of what is being referred to here – although there are several different possible interpretations.

Manna was what God provided to the Israelites wandering in the wilderness to sustain them. There was also some manna hidden in the Ark of the Covenant in the temple.

So the hidden manna promised to overcomers, will be sustaining, from God and something we can’t see or experience at present. It is a promise of an unknown but heavenly refreshment, and food for the soul. It sounds good!

White stones were given to those found innocent in a court of law and also to victors in contests. They were used as admission tickets to special events. There are 12 stones sewn into the high priests robe with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel on it.

So the themes we see here are being counted as not guilty, to overcoming i.e. winning, to being let in to something good and to be counted in God’s family. There is even a new name – perhaps fulfilling this promise in Isaiah:

ISA 62:2 The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

And this new name is very special and unique to each person - it speaks of God's individual care for us and his individual knowledge of us – we are not just numbers we have intimate, relational names – names directly given by Jesus!

The challenges for us

Will we remain true to the name of Jesus when persecution comes? We don't know, is the truthful answer. But even in small things, do we avoid sin? Like in the workplace, with friends, in business and tax dealings for example. Are we always truthful even when we think it may disadvantage us?

Are we living up to God's standards in the area of sexual immorality? Remember even looking at a woman (or man) with lust is sinful? Do we sometimes worship at the altar of things rather than the Creator of all things and in effect put things other than God first in our lives? Is the grace of God teaching us not to sin – or are we a bit complacent about it?

For me – I fall at all of these fences – and if it wasn't for the mercy of God – where would I be – where would we all be?

But sin is like a deep cancer that needs to be removed. It is very serious. Even what we think of as small sins are very serious – and likely to grow. A simple sin can have huge consequences – it cuts us off from the blessing of God – not in a permanent and absolute way – but it spoils our relationship with him. He is not pleased at all and like a good parent will teach us - sometimes uncomfortably – where we are going wrong. The ultimate tool he has for this is a sharp two edged sword – so don't be surprised when we feel it sometimes.

The reward

But – if we overcome – there is a great reward. Heavenly food and refreshment like we have never known, admission into the heavenly kingdom, having been declared innocent and guilt free. A new unique name signifying our eternal special relationship with our loving God. What great promises we have and a great challenge. Let's take this seriously and we will see our lives be transformed to reflect more and more the glory of God.