

Revelation 2:12-16

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 March 2019

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] So, this evening we're going to be thinking about the words that Jesus directs to the church in Pergamum, in Asia Minor, as that message was directed to them through the Apostle John.

Let's start with a curious or a fun fact. And the word parchment, the English word parchment, is derived from the place name Pergamum, the place that we're going to be considering, or the church in Pergamum that we're going to be considering this evening.

Now, I read that in a commentary and they just threw it out as a kind of, you know, anecdotal fact, but I was kind of intrigued by it. So, I kind of explored a little bit further, wondering, well, why? What's the connection?

Well, bear with me as I just explained this to you, just as a way of kind of introducing what we're going to go on to say. The Greek form of the English name Pergamum, or the English adaptation, is Pergamon.

And the Greek word Pergamenon means of or from Pergamum, so something that comes from Pergamum. Now, Pergamum, or Pergamon, was closely associated with the use of skin hides as an alternative writing material to papyrus.

[1 : 21] You know, we all heard of papyrus as a writing material at that time. But there was this alternative of using animal hides. Because this city was particularly associated with that use or that technology, I suppose, in time, documents or letters written on skin hides came to be known as Pergamenon, or from Pergamon.

So, somebody would see a document, and it was in a skin hide, and they would say, ah, that's from Pergamon. That's where they do that. Now, it wasn't the only place where they used that material, but it was famous for it, I suppose.

Now, I don't know if you're following so far, but this is where it actually gets even more interesting. Well, I think so. I hope you share this interest. I was a little bit intrigued by this because I was thinking of how, you know, in terms of New Testament manuscripts that are in existence, that go back, the most ancient ones go back to the first century or the end of the first century, and then other very ancient ones into the second century.

They are almost entirely written on papyrus. It's only later that you find some that would have been written on parchment, on skin hides.

And so, I wondered why it was that in Pergamon, there was this focus on or this use of parchments as opposed to papyrus, which was generally what was used in the ancient world.

[2 : 50] Now, this is where it gets very interesting. It turns out that in about 150 BC, so this is about 250 years before John writes this letter, that Pharaoh Ptolemy V refused to sell papyrus to King Eumenes of Pergamon.

And the reason he refused to sell papyrus is that in Pergamon, there was a library, a great library, and the king was intent on making it the greatest library in the ancient world. But of course, in order for that to happen, he needed papyrus to write the books on.

Well, and the pharaoh, threatened by this, said, well, I'm not selling you papyrus. So there. Hence, the need for King, what's his name again, Eumenes, Eumenes, to think of an alternative.

And that's why there was this focus on using parchments, or what became known as Pergamons. And as I was kind of exploring this, and it's not got a great deal to do with the content of the letter, but it did raise the question in my mind, as I say, not a particularly deep question, but I'm wondering what John wrote on when he wrote Revelation.

I think it would probably have been on papyrus. We don't know. We don't know the answer to that. But it may have been on parchment. A little intriguing, kind of, I suppose, biblical, I don't know, I wouldn't say call it evidence, but nonetheless relevant is how, you remember when Paul writes to

Timothy in 2 Timothy, and he's asking that his books or scrolls and parchments be brought to him. [4 : 32] There, the two words are used. So one of the words would refer, in more probability, to papyrus, the scrolls, and that was the papyrus had that facility that you could put it into scrolls. But when there's a reference to parchments, that, in all probability, did refer to material that had been written on skin high as opposed to on papyrus.

So Paul certainly had both in his library, I suppose. So what John wrote on, well, we don't know. And of course, what interests us really isn't what he wrote on, but the words that he wrote and the words of Jesus that he records for us.

And so let's turn to what was actually written to the church in Pergamum by John. And the way we're going to divide what we are going to say is we're going to use headings that have a medical flavor, and I'll tell you in a moment why that is, in a way, fitting.

We're going to consider, first of all, Jesus' diagnosis of the church in Pergamum. We're going to consider Jesus' prescription for the church in Pergamum. And we're also going to think about what we might call Jesus' prognosis as he contemplates the future of the church and of the believers in Pergamum.

Now, the use of medical language isn't altogether random. One of the things Pergamum was very well known for was as a center for the worship of the Greek god Asclepius, who was the god of healing.

[5 : 56] And we'll come back to this god in a moment because it also possibly relates to what is written in this letter or in part of this letter.

So that's the way we're going to consider this. First of all, the diagnosis, then the prescription, and then the prognosis. We'll spend much more time on the diagnosis because the letter itself spends much more time on that, and then much more briefly, the other two elements.

So what does Jesus make of his patient, the church at Pergamum? What is his diagnosis? And as is often the case, not always the case, but as is often the case in these letters or in these messages to the churches, there's good news and there's bad news.

But we'll start, as Jesus does, with the good news. What is the good news? Well, let's turn to the passage there in Revelation chapter 2. And there are two things that are said of the church that are good news.

They are things that are being commended. And we find them there in verse 13. Yet you remain true to my name.

[7 : 06] So they're being commended for this. The believers in Pergamum, they're being commended by Jesus because they remained true to my name, to the name of Jesus. And then, very much connected, immediately following, they're told, you did not renounce your faith in me.

So they remain true to the name, and they did not renounce their faith in Jesus. This is what they are commended for. Now, to understand the significance of these statements, I think we need to notice three things that we find in the letter.

First of all, consider where the believers lived, and what is said about the place where they lived, where they were true to the name of Jesus, and where they did not renounce their faith in Jesus. Where was it that they were living? Living, or where were they living? What had happened that is mentioned explicitly in the letter? And then just think about the actual words themselves, and the significance of the words.

We've simply read them out, but we want to think about what they mean, or a little bit more, explore what they mean. First of all, where is it that they're living? Well, the manner in which Pergamum is described is rather intriguing.

[8 : 18] And this is Jesus, and he says, I know where you live. In fact, if that's all we heard, it would sound rather threatening. I know where you live. But of course, that's not the intention at all.

But then what does he go on to say? I know where you live, where Satan has his throne. This is the reference. This is a description of Pergamum. This is where they live. They live where Satan has his throne.

And then, if we miss it the first time, then just down in verse, or at the end of that same verse, 13, once again, this is repeated, that Pergamum is the place where Satan lives.

Now, what does that mean? It sounds rather dire description of this city. But what is the meaning of it? Different suggestions are made.

It's true that in Pergamum, there was a very impressive temple to Zeus and to all the pagan and idolatrous worship associated with that.

[9 : 20] Some suggest that maybe that's the reference. Some suggest that it was the prevalence of the imperial cult in Pergamum. Of course, that was true of the other cities as well. It wasn't unique in that sense.

Some suggest that maybe it has to do with the worship of Asclepius, the god of healing. And the symbol of Asclepius was a serpent. And to this day, that symbol is associated in some way with the medical profession.

And that symbol was ubiquitous in Pergamum. All over the place, you would have that symbol. And of course, we know how Satan is identified in that way also as the serpent.

And so perhaps these are some of the ideas that have been suggested. But I don't think we need to home in on any one of these possibilities, valid though they may or may not be. But simply recognize that Pergamum was a city where Satan was active.

And in a measure held sway. Of course, we know he didn't hold ultimate sway. But in a very real way, he did hold sway in this city.

[10 : 30] Now, even as we say that, we probably do need to just pause for a moment and acknowledge two things that we believe. And that the Bible states with no apology and very explicitly.

Satan is real. Now, that's something that many people wouldn't accept. You know, Satan is simply a figure of myth, maybe even the object of fun.

I don't know if you noticed, and this is really a rather sad thing to acknowledge, but I don't know if you picked up, it was in the news last week about, you know, the most popular names in Scotland last year.

And one of the names, one poor child had been given the name Lucifer by parents who should have known better. But it does illustrate how just the whole idea of Satan or devil or Lucifer is simply not recognized as somebody real, as a real person, as we know, a fallen angel.

But Jesus makes it very clear that he believes in Satan, believes in Satan's existence. In fact, this isn't the only occasion. In the previous letter, he's made reference to the devil being responsible for imprisoning the believers.

[11 : 49] So Satan's real. And the other thing we have to acknowledge is that Satan is active. He was active in Pergamum, and he remains active. To different degrees, it would seem that in Pergamum, he was particularly active, and there no doubt were reasons for that.

But nonetheless, he is alive and kicking. He is alive and active, and we have to recognize and acknowledge that. So Pergamum, and this is the point I want to make, Pergamum was a tough place to live as a Christian.

And so the fact that the believers are described as remaining true and as not renouncing their faith was particularly commendable. This was a difficult place to remain true.

This was a difficult place to not renounce your faith, and yet they remained true and did not renounce their faith. That's the first thing it's worth noting. The other thing is to notice is what had happened in Pergamum that is mentioned explicitly.

And well, there in verse 13, we're told that a believer by the name of Antipas, who is spoken of as my faithful witness, was put to death in your city.

[12 : 57] So Jesus is writing to the believers in Pergamum, and he says, look, I know about this. You know, I know about Antipas. You loved him. He was one of your fellowship. He was a faithful witness.

And he was killed. And he was killed because of his loyalty to Jesus, because he remained true to my name, because he wouldn't renounce his faith. This was the outcome for him.

And I think there's no reason why we shouldn't understand Antipas here as being a real person that has been spoken of, who was killed because of his commitment to Jesus.

And of course, that tragedy again highlights the faithfulness of the church in Pergamum, that even in those circumstances of real danger, they had remained true to their God and to their Savior.

Now, it does seem that this death of Antipas was perhaps a one-off, but certainly not something that should be understood as being a feature permanently of life for the church in Pergamum, because there is almost a time reference there.

[14:08] In verse 13, you did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, you know, when this happened. The implication seems to be that this had happened at some point in the past.

It would seem that it hadn't happened again. So it wasn't the case that many believers were being killed. There was one believer who on one particular occasion, in circumstances that we're not privy to, who had been killed.

But even in those circumstances, the others remained true to their faith. Now, of course, when we think about the circumstances of believers today, sadly, for many believers today, such persecution is not a thing of the past.

It's not an isolated incident. I was reading just yesterday, I think it was, from, I think I would describe as a very reputable source.

Some of you will have heard of the Barnabas Fund. So that's a ministry that seeks to support persecuted Christians in different parts of the world. And this is a report that they gave just in this past week, that in the last few weeks, in northern Nigeria, over 300 Christians have been killed in a merciless killing spree by Fulani militants.

[15:27] So that's since February, February through to the end of March. So in the course of a few weeks. And one incident in particular was recorded on the 14th of February, 300 gunmen chanting, Allah Akbar, slaughtered over 40 Christians in one village.

And there was more to the report. I mentioned that just to highlight that when we read of persecution of believers 2,000 years ago in Pergamon, we think, oh, well, that's just ancient history. To be reminded that it is by no means ancient history that believers are, in many ways in this past decade, increasingly being the object of violence and persecution.

So this good news about the church in Pergamon, their loyalty to Jesus, their unwillingness to renounce their faith in Jesus, is all the more commendable because of the place where they live and the events that had taken place.

But what about what Jesus actually says? Can we draw out a little bit more about what the meaning of what he says is? Well, there are two things that he said. He said, you remain true to my name.

[16:42] Now, interestingly, the verb that is used there is the verb to hold. You hold my name. And it's possible that there's a play on words between what we've already heard about Jesus as the one who holds the seven stars.

We saw that in chapter one, and that speaks of his care for his people. In chapter two, when he is speaking to the church in Ephesus, once again, he's described as the one who holds tightly to his people.

And it is that verb that is used here. So there's maybe a sense in which Jesus is saying, I'm holding on to you. But how I delight in knowing that you also are holding on to me. You're remaining true to me.

You're holding on to your Savior. And I commend you for that. They were loyal to Jesus in a hostile environment. It also seems that the form of words here, where it says, yet you remain true to my name, maybe particularly this reference to the name of Jesus, it would seem that the sense here is that they were always ready to give public testimony or witness to Jesus.

These Christians identified as Christians. They didn't hide it. They didn't try and ensure that nobody knew because of the consequences. No, they were very public in identifying as followers of Jesus, as disciples of Jesus, as those who loved and followed Jesus, of telling other people about Jesus.

[18:11] This was what they did. And Jesus commends them for it. I wonder if that's true of us. Are we those who are marked by identifying joyfully with our Savior and sharing with others the good news about him?

But then it's also said of them, you did not renounce your faith. And I suspect here there's a causal connection between the two statements made concerning the believers. See, these believers were vocal and they're witness to Jesus.

And the outcome of that boldness for some and for many and on some occasions was that they were challenged. You know, this didn't go down well with some of their fellow citizens. And so when they were identifying as followers of Jesus, there were those who would say, we don't want to know. We're not interested. Be quiet. Shut up. Renounce your faith. You know, you're going against our customs. You're going against our traditions. We serve other gods.

Don't come here spreading your newfound faith. And so they were urged to renounce their faith, but were told that they did not. They refused to renounce their faith.

[19 : 20] And of course, that refusal, no doubt, is what caused Antipas his life. Well, what about us? Are we challenged to be quiet?

Are we challenged to renounce our faith? And if not, why not? Is it because we're silent? You see, if we say nothing, then nobody would have any reason to challenge us.

Nobody would have any reason to call us to remain silent or to renounce our faith. If we're hidden, then there would be no cause for that kind of challenge.

So that's the good news. The believers in Pergamum, loyal to Jesus. The bad news is in verses 14 and 15. Now, before focusing on the details, notice one key contrast between the good news and the bad news.

The good news concerned resistance to an external threat or to external attack. You know, there were those outside of the church who were threatening and challenging and attacking the church.

[20 : 24] But the bad news concerns tolerance of and passivity towards an internal threat. Notice in verses 14 and 15, Jesus says to them, you have people there who believe this, who are teaching this, or you have those who hold to.

So where's the threat coming from? That they're not resisting as they are. From inside. Not from outside, but from inside. Now, of course, this is a pattern that repeats itself through the centuries. Churches are most often damaged from within. Not always. Churches can be damaged from external attack or by external attack. But so often in the history of the church, it's the internal threat that proves much more dangerous.

And that seems to have been the case or is stated as the case in Pergamon. And what is this internal threat? Well, it has to do with teaching that is being tolerated.

There in verse 14, nevertheless, I have a few things against you. There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam. And then it mentions again in verse 15, those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

[21 : 30] Now, we don't really know exactly what teaching is being referred to in these two instances. We presume that they were distinct, but perhaps really quite similar. The error was a similar error, even though it's identified or described as in two camps, as it were.

What was this teaching? Well, we don't know, but we are certainly given a clue when it is described as the teaching of Balaam. Now, here I think we can confidently assert that Jesus isn't saying that there was a man called Balaam in the church in Pergamon, but rather it's a reference to Balaam, a character that we read of in the Old Testament, in the book of Numbers.

Now, we don't have time to draw out all the clues from the account of Balaam, but let me just quickly summarize the gist of the matter.

When the Israelites were making their way to the promised land towards the end of their pilgrimage or their exile in the desert, you recall that there were those who were opposing them as they sought to reach the promised land, and God granted them victories over their enemies.

Now, in that context, King Balak of Moab, who is referenced here in this letter, sought the services of Balaam. Now, Balaam was some kind of shaman who would curse people for a price.

[22 : 55] And so the king thought, well, this is my way of opposing Israel. I can get this guy Balaam to curse Israel, and that way they won't be able to harm us. That was his idea of the king of Moab.

But we know what happened. God warned Balaam not to do that. And Balaam paid attention to God's warning. No doubt he was somewhat taken aback by God giving him this warning, but he wisely paid heed to God's warning and refused to curse Israel.

And so this threat from outside, from the Moabites, was neutralized by God. But then we read immediately after that, immediately after Balaam refusing to curse the Israelites, we read in chapter 25 in verse 1 that the Israelite men began to be seduced seduced by the nations and the tribes round about them.

And this often resulted in idolatry and in sexual immorality of one kind or another. And then a few chapters later, when this is being analyzed, it said of these men, these Israelites, that they followed Balaam's advice.

Now, here in Revelation, the idea is that Balaam, though he refused to curse the Israelites, advised the king of Moab and said, well, look, I won't do this for you, but maybe one way you could weaken the Israelites is by seducing them.

[24 : 21] I'm not going to curse them, but how about this as an idea? And it would seem that that's what happened. And the Israelites succumbed to this seduction and succumbed to idolatry and to the sexual immorality that accompanied it.

And so it would seem that in Pergamum, something similar was happening. So here you have these Christians who are loyal to Jesus. They're not being intimidated by those who oppose them.

And yet, within their number, there are those who are suggesting to them, well, you know, look, we live in a multicultural city here and there's all these practices of our neighbors and let's not be too radical, let's not be too fanatical.

If we're invited to a feast to some god, well, there's no harm in going. You know, at the end of the day, we don't even believe in these gods. And why cause trouble for ourselves by being too fanatical and radical about these things?

And they were encouraging people to submit to the seduction of those round about them.

[25 : 35] And the church in Pergamum, though that was not true of all of the members of the church, nonetheless, the church, and perhaps particularly the leaders, were responsible of tolerating those within their number who were taking this view and encouraging others to take a similar view.

Now, in Pergamum, what that looked like, as the letter tells us, involved eating food sacrificed to idols. You know, that's mentioned there in verse 14 in reference to the Israelites in the days of Balaam, but it would seem replicated in Pergamum.

Now, what about us today? Does the teaching of Balaam rear its ugly head today? Well, I think it does in so many ways. We, like the Israelites of old, can be seduced by the spirit of the age and drop our guard.

We can be persuaded to accommodate our views and water down our moral standards in search of acceptance and respectability. Nobody likes to be branded an extremist or a fanatic or a bigot or a Puritan and we think, well, maybe in order not to be viewed in that way, in order not to be branded in that way, well, we can just accommodate what we believe and how we express what we believe and how we behave to be more accepted by those among whom we live and work and move.

Now, the problem in Pergamum wasn't that everybody was guilty of this accommodation, but that the church tolerated this accommodation. Well, that's the description.

[27 : 16] Let's just quickly notice the prescription that Jesus gives to the church in Pergamum and it's just one word in verse 16. The one word, repent, therefore.

Repent of what? Well, repent of not dealing with this false teaching, of not challenging those guilty of accommodation and idolatry and sexual immorality. Being too nice, but actually not being nice at all.

Too cowardly to challenge and rebuke for fear of rejection. And that's true of us, isn't it? We might be aware of those within the fellowship and, of course, sometimes it will be ourselves who are guilty of this, but those who are not living up to the standards that God demands of us.

And we have a responsibility to lovingly, but clearly, to bring that to the attention of those who are in that circumstance.

But it's so difficult to do. We're so unwilling to do it. We're so afraid of the consequences of doing it, and so we do nothing. And perhaps, obviously, as a leadership, we have a particular responsibility in this regard, though it's a responsibility that I think is shared by all.

[28 : 27] We are to repent of that cowardice in not clearly outlining what God demands of His people and rebuking those who are failing to live to the standards that God has established.

That's the prescription. What about the prognosis? Well, that's the end of the letter. And the prognosis that Jesus sets out depends on what the church does or how the church in Pergamum responds to the call to repent.

First of all, what will happen if they don't repent? Well, we read that in verse 16. Therefore, repent, therefore, otherwise, so if you don't repent, otherwise I will come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Jesus will exercise judgment. He will take direct action as it were. He'll not do so with a physical sword, but with words, the sword of my mouth.

And bring judgment on those who are guilty in the manner described. But what if they do repent?

What if the church repents? What if the believers repent? What if they hear the words that are said?

[29 : 37] If they repent, if they overcome, if they're victorious, to use all the language that we find in the letter. What will be the outcome for them? What is the prognosis for them? Well, Jesus promises two things.

There at the end of the section, in verse 17, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches, to the one who is victorious, to the one who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna.

That's the first thing that God promises to those who overcome. I will give some of the hidden manna. What's that? Again, it's rather cryptic, symbolic language.

Well, the manna we know was God's provision for his people in the desert. So clearly there is a reference here to God providing for his people. But this hidden manna, this secret manna, this spiritual manna, if you wish, surely points us in the direction of Jesus himself, our bread of life. We've read the passage, we sang the words. Jesus is our manna. He is that bread of life that he gives to his people. He gives himself to his people.

[30 : 44] And as his people are faithful to him, so we feast on him as we enjoy fellowship and life with him. There's also possibly a contrast between the food consumed at the pagan feasts that is spoken of there in verse 14.

They ate food sacrificed to idols with this spiritual manna. It's almost as if Jesus is saying, you know, he's saying to the people, look, get real. You can have this miserly food, this feast, this food that is served in pagan feasts and festivals.

For a moment, it will satisfy you and then it will destroy you. Or you can have this hidden manna. You can feast on your Savior. You can feast on that which will endure and nourish and give life. What do you choose? So that's the promise, hidden manna. But then also secondly, and with this we close, there's this promise of a white stone with a new name. Again there in verse 17.

Again, there's many suggestions made as to what this is referring to, especially this white stone. Perhaps the most plausible suggestion, and we can only throw it out there as a possibility, is that there's a reference here to white stones that were used by jurors to declare a verdict of innocence.

[32 : 08] So in the ancient world, if jurors were brought together and they had to give their verdict, they were given stones, black stones and white stones.

And if they thought that the person who was being tried was guilty, they would hand in a black stone. And if they determined that the person was innocent, they would hand in a white stone. And so some have suggested that maybe here there's a reference to that and the idea being that those who are in Jesus and faithful to Jesus, those who overcome, are declared righteous by Jesus. They're given this white stone. But maybe more significantly is the fact that on this stone there is a name written, a new name. What about this new name? Well, we know that in the Bible the name of a person represents the person.

The name represents the character and identity of the holder. It's not just a tag to identify, as names tend to be for us. It's something much more significant. And Jesus promises to those who repent, to those who overcome, to those who are faithful, He promises a new name, a new identity, a new life, eternal life.

And this is the promise then that Jesus gives for those who respond to the call to repent, to remain loyal to the Savior.

[33 : 31] Well, let's just draw this all together and just ask a question. What is the challenge in all of this for us? Well, certainly there is the call and the challenge and the encouragement to remain true, to hold on to Jesus, to identify as a Christian.

Even in this week that's begun, identify as a follower of Jesus. Tell others about Jesus. This would seem as what the believers in Pergamum were doing and are commended for.

Let's not hide our faith. Let's not be embarrassed about the one we serve and the one who loves us and has done so much for us. In the face of hostility, if indeed there is, in the face of opposition and threat, do not renounce or hide your faith.

Don't compromise. Don't be seduced by the world and its standards. Be that in the area of sexual conduct or in any other area of conduct. And if you are compromising in one way or another, then repent of that and be assured that Jesus knows you and will reward you.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the example that we are given of the believers in Pergamum. We thank you for their faithfulness to you.

[34 : 50] We pray that we would also be characterized by holding on to you, by remaining true to your name, by not renouncing our faith, even in the face of challenge and threat and possible prejudice because of our loyalty and commitment to you.

Forgive us for the times when we are tempted to lower the standards that you have set for us, for our good, when we are tempted to become more and more like the world in which we live, to be indistinguishable often in our morality and in our conduct and even in our beliefs and opinions from those that surround us.

Help us to be different, not for the sake of it, but different in the manner that you expect of us as your people. We do thank you that you are the God who knows us.

You are the God who rewards your faithful people. You are the God who enables us to be faithful.

And we ask that you would enable us, even in this week that is beginning, to be faithful to you.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.