

Revelation 2:12-17

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[0 : 00] Book of Revelation, chapter 2, and reading from verse 12. To the angel of the church in Pergamum write, These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

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.

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, sacrifice to idols, and by committing sexual immorality.

Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent, therefore, otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen. 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.

[1 : 27] Amen. We'll leave it there. We'll come back to that in a few moments' time after we sing from the Green Books in Psalm 142. Psalm 142, the tune is Duke Street. We're going to sing the whole of the psalm.

Psalm 142. I cry for mercy to the Lord. To him I lift my voice in prayer. Before the Lord I bring my plea. To him my trouble I declare.

Each time my spirit faints in me, you are the one who knows my way. For in the path on which I walk, a hidden snare for me they lay. Psalm 142, from the beginning down to verse 7.

And that's the whole of the psalm. And we'll stand to praise God together. Let's just bow our heads for a few moments in prayer.

Our Father, as we sang those words, we pray for anyone amongst us who sings them with a heavy heart. I cry for mercy to the Lord. To him I lift my voice in prayer.

[2 : 28] Before the Lord I bring my plea. To him my trouble I declare. Lord, we're conscious of times in our lives where these words have special, special meaning and special relevance.

And Lord, we pray for anyone who's going through sadness or grief or trouble or difficulty at this time. Lord, our lives are such a mixture of times when we see clearly the blessing of God.

And yet there are times also when the Lord takes us through real perplexity. And Lord, times that we do not understand. And times that we can only look to you and to find that refuge that the psalmist spoke about.

Lord, be our refuge and our strength tonight, we pray. And make yourself known to us in a very precious, in a very special way. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

We're going to turn to Revelation in chapter 2. I do confess that it wasn't that long since I had this passage at the prayer meeting.

[3 : 44] However, the reason for taking it tonight is because I'm really not accustomed to having to preach three times on one Sunday. And yet I have a lot more sympathy now with ministers who do have to preach three times on a Sunday.

So you'll forgive me perhaps if I'm taking or I'm repeating material that I had recently at a prayer meeting. Of course, if you weren't at the prayer meeting, then this will be new to you.

Revelation chapter 2 is one of the letters to the seven churches. It's the letter to the church in Pergamum. And I just want to reflect very, very briefly tonight on some of the things which are said to the church in Pergamum.

We mustn't be too specific about those churches because the fact that there were seven letters to seven churches is an indicator that these letters are to the church in general.

And they are letters to the church in every age. And they are indicators of what Jesus thinks. They're not John's letters to the church. They are Jesus' letters to the church.

[4 : 59] And uppermost on our mind tonight should be the question, what does Jesus think of our church? What does Jesus think of our fellowship and our preaching and our witness here in Aberdeen?

And as we come to these letters, we must come with that question on our minds. If we were the church at Pergamum, what would Jesus have to say to us? And of course, there's a sense in which the problems which these churches had to face are similar to the problems which churches had to face in many eras throughout the history of the New Testament.

That's why those letters are so important. Now, the city of Pergamum was a very important city. It was a capital city of the Roman province of Asia.

It was famous for its parchments. And it was famous also for its library, which contained about 200,000 parchments. It was famous for its health and for one particular doctor, a famous doctor who lived there.

But the Lord Jesus is concerned primarily not about its educational status or its social status or its political status or its trading economic status.

[6 : 13] He is concerned about its spiritual status. And he sums that up for us in one sentence and he says this, I know where you live where Satan has his throne.

And what does he mean by that? What does Jesus mean by that? Well, some people think that he meant that it's where the Pergamum was a place where the altar, a place called the altar of Zeus was.

But it's more likely to have referred to the whole principle of emperor worship. Christians were being forced at that time and in that place to worship the emperor.

And of course, you can imagine the kind of pressure that that would put ordinary Christians under. They couldn't worship the emperor because to worship the emperor would be to undermine their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is no king but the Lord Jesus Christ. And many a time throughout the history of the church, Christians have been persecuted and forced in an attempt to get them to worship some other person or serve some other being except the Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 22] Jesus is Lord was the motto of the early Christians. And Jesus is Lord must be our motto in every era and in every age.

And of course, there were people being put to death for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And because of this, Jesus calls the place, the synagogue, the dwelling place where Satan has his throne.

Now, in every one of those seven letters, there are four sections. And I want to go through very briefly those four phases with you this evening. There's first of all, encouragement.

Jesus brings a word of encouragement to the church. Then he brings a rebuke to the church. And then thirdly, he brings counsel, advice to the church.

And then fourthly, he brings a promise. Now, it's important to get them in that order. Because if you come with rebuke, if you come pointing out the problems and the difficulties and the sinfulness, then it's likely to lead to discouragement and despondency.

[8 : 36] But Jesus, he cares deeply for his church. He tells us when he writes to the church in Ephesus, these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand.

The seven stars represented those very same churches. And he holds them in his hand. His position with relation to his church is one of care and concern and control.

But he also walks among the seven golden lampstands. And that's saying that Jesus not only holds them, as a father holds his children, his hand, caringly, he also walks among them.

Because he is involved in them. He is going through the troubles and the difficulties that they are going through with them. There is never a moment when Jesus becomes detached from his church. He made that clear when he said to his disciples, you are the branches and I am the vine. He was reminding them of his permanent attachment to his church.

[9 : 37] And the same is true wherever his church is found. Be it here in the first century or here in the 21st century in Aberdeen. Jesus is attached to his church.

He cares passionately for them. And so he wants to, first of all, bring them a word of encouragement. The encouragement is this. You remain true to my name.

Even despite the pressure that you are under to disobey and to deny me and to worship Caesar. You can imagine it. You can imagine it. Imagine someone, imagine tonight people, Roman soul or police were to come in and to take us all to prison.

And the only thing that we would have to do to get released from prison would be to deny our allegiance to Jesus Christ. It would be dead easy, wouldn't it? Just sign the paper saying, I no longer worship Jesus Christ.

It would be tempted to say, well, you know, worship is something that goes on in my heart. I can sign the paper. I don't really mean it, but I can sign the paper. But they couldn't do that because that would have been dishonest. Well, I tell you tonight that there are many places in the world where Christians live under that very threat of being imprisoned and being put to death.

[10:51] Being tortured and being put to death simply because of their allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. And we owe them as our brothers and sisters in Christ our prayers.

And yet they remain true to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus says, he says to them, even when Antipas, this was obviously a particular person.

In verse 13, one of their number, a Christian, he was put to death. My faithful witness who was put to death in your cities. It was obviously a well-known incident where one of their number was put to death because he was a Christian.

And then he says to them also, I know, by word of encouragement, he says, I know where you live. Now, why does he say that? Well, he says that because it's important that we know the sympathy and the understanding that Jesus has for our circumstances.

Jesus knows the particular difficulties that the Christians in Pergamum have to go through. He knows the pressures that they're under. He knows their surroundings. He knows, for example, many of them couldn't get work unless they denied their allegiance to Jesus.

[12:14] And unless they said, there's no king but Caesar. There's no, we worship Caesar. And so for many of them, their Christian faith meant poverty and unemployment. And Jesus comes to them and says, I know.

I know the pressures you're under. I know the kind of hardships that you're having to go through. So he takes into account whatever he's going to say to them by way of rebuking them for the things that were going wrong, the things in which they were going wrong.

He says, I know your circumstances. And he comes to us tonight and he says exactly the same thing. He knows the problems of the 21st century. He knows the pressures that we are under.

The temptations. The particular temptations of a media-filled secular society. He knows how easy it is to conform to that society.

And he comes to us tonight and he says, I'm not unaware of it. And I'm not unconcerned either about the pressures that you're going to have to go through in the coming week as a Christian. Having to be faithful.

[13:18] Being faithful to your obedience to the Bible under those circumstances in a secular world. So he tells us, he comes to us and he says, I know where you live.

And the problem is that sometimes we don't, when it comes to, when we judge other Christians, that we don't take into consideration their circumstances. We can be very judgmental when we look at someone else who's maybe a brother or sister in Christ and we come to an instant judgment, find out something about them, come to an instant conclusion about them.

And we don't take, we don't even think to take their circumstances into account. Let's be, let's have the same sympathy with others as Christ has with us.

Unless, when we come across someone who perhaps has become backslidden because they've buckled under the pressure of a 21st century secular society, then let's approach them with understanding.

And if anyone is caught in a fault, Paul says, you who are spiritual should restore that person gently. Why do we restore them gently? Because Christ has been gentle with us.

[14:34] And Christ comes to the church in Pergamum, he doesn't come to them with a rod. He comes to them with some very, very solemn things to say. But he comes to them in love and in gentleness.

And he says, I know your circumstances. So that's the first thing then. He comes with encouragement. But then the second thing that he says to them in verse 14 is by way of rebuke.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. And the particular issue which the Lord had against the people of Pergamum was this. 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. That was the first thing that the Lord had against them.

There was another thing as well. In verse 15, likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Now let's look at these two things very, very, very briefly.

[15 : 34] The first one takes us all the way back to the Old Testament. And to this character we meet in the book of Numbers called Balaam. Now it was when the Israelites were going through the wilderness.

And they were going through the land of Moab. And the king of Moab was extremely concerned about his safety. He didn't be. He didn't have been. Because the Israelites were never a threat to him. But he was overly concerned about his safety.

So he thought, he knew he didn't have the forces, the military forces to defeat the Israelites. There were just too many. And so what he did was he hired a soothsayer from way far away, Mesopotamia, called Balaam.

And he offered him money, sent an envoy to him. And he offered him money if he would come all the way to Moab and put a curse on the Israelites. And when his envoys travelled all the way to Mesopotamia to ask or to hire Balaam with the lure of money.

Balaam, being something of a God-fearer, he prayed about it first. And God said, on no account, go with these men. Do not go with these men.

[16 : 46] They are my enemies. And they want you to put a curse on my people. These people are blessed. Do not go with them. So he sent them away. They went back to Moab and the king of Moab said, no.

Let's send more important ones. So they sent another envoy all the way to Mesopotamia, a way to plead with them again. Will you not please? Will it offer you even more money to come and put a curse on them?

And Balaam, instead of refusing right away on the basis of the answer God had given them initially, he prayed to God again. You see, he thought that God was going to change his mind because he secretly wanted the money.

He was a lover of money. And he would have done anything. He would have done anything to persuade God to let him go. And God allowed him to go with the men.

Now that didn't mean that God wanted him to go. He allowed him to go. See, God can allow us things without actually him willing or wanting us to go. And what we need to do as Christians tonight is to find out what pleases the Lord.

[17 : 48] That's what Paul tells us. What pleases the Lord is what should govern our lives. Not what God simply allows us to do. And very often, we have to be very careful here. Say you're faced with a choice.

Say you suspect that one option is wrong. You can actually persuade yourself. You can go to the Lord and you can pray about that.

And you can persuade yourself that God is actually allowing you to do something that is actually wrong. That's what Balaam did. He persuaded himself that God was allowing. That God actually wanted him to go along with the men to Moab.

We have to be very, very careful. That what we think is God's blessing us in something is not actually us carrying out what we want to do in our own selfish hearts.

Be very, very careful. Let's be very careful as Christians. Whenever we talk about the will of God. Because we can change, we can twist and turn the will of God to suit ourselves. Well, God's will doesn't turn.

[18 : 50] God's will is the same. And it was never God's intention that Balaam should go with the men. But he allowed him to do it. Because deep down, that's what Balaam wanted to do.

So off he went. And of course you then had the incident where the ass, the donkey, spoke. And we don't have time to go into that. But that was again another demonstration of the wrongness of what Balaam was doing.

Eventually Balaam got to Moab. And the king was overjoyed. He said, on you go then. He said, I'll pay you. You go away and you curse the Israelites. So off he went up a mountain. And as soon as he opened his mouth to curse, he couldn't.

Because God, God wouldn't allow him to. And in fact he took the cursing out of his mouth. And he replaced the cursing with blessings. So every time he opened his mouth to curse the Israelites, he actually blessed them.

And the king of Moab was absolutely furious. He said, go again and do it. So he sent him the second time. And he went again. And he was just about to curse the Israelites. And God took the cursing away out of his mouth and replaced it with blessing.

[19 : 52] And instead of cursing the Israelites, he blessed the Israelites. Because they were God's people. And so the king of Moab was even more furious. He sent him a third time. And the same thing happened again.

The fourth time, the same thing happened again. Until the king of Moab completely gave up on Balaam and sent him away. But the story doesn't finish there.

Balaam really, really wanted the money. You see, he had a selfish heart. And Balaam knew that he was never going to get the money by cursing Israel.

Because the Lord wasn't going to allow him to curse Israel. But there was another way whereby he might get his due reward. And he went all the way back to Balak, the king of Moab.

And he said, look, however hard you try to get me to curse these people, I can't curse them because they're blessed. However, there's another way. All you have to do is to appeal to their sexual instincts.

[20 : 57] And you've done it. You'll destroy them. And that's what happened. Plan B was. Plan A was cursing them.

Plan B was tempting them. Plan B was. So, Balak sent his women in. And they seduced the Israelites. The men. And the men fell.

And they started committing adultery. And they started going off with their women. And they started worshipping their idols. Because one thing led to another in the Old Testament.

And within a matter of a short period of time, the whole of Israel were in danger of being destroyed by the Lord. Because they had sinned so much. Now, this is what the church were in danger of doing in Pergamum.

He says this. 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.

[22 : 01] It looked like the same thing was happening within the church at Pergamum. That they were falling into the same trap as the people of Israel by falling into the teaching of Balaam.

Now, coupled with that was the Nicolaitans. Now, the Nicolaitans were a group that were infiltrating the early church at that time. And they kind of believed that you could compromise.

And again, it's the whole region of sexual morality. They believed that you could compromise your position as a Christian with a position that the Romans took which was pretty much promiscuity. They said, look, it's not really... The teaching of the Christian faith can be adjusted. It can be modified.

In order for us to live a little bit more comfortably and a little bit more pleasurably in the society we live. We don't have to hold to this exclusive teaching of one man, one woman, husband and wife thing.

[23 : 04] We can surely live a little bit more comfortably with the Roman... in Roman society where they're much more free with their sexual ethics. Well, the Lord said, no, they're not free.

And the Lord tells us today in a similar society that says, why constrict yourself, why restrict yourself to a one man, one woman, husband and wife?

And why insist that sex is only for a husband and a wife? Because God says so. And that's it. The teaching of the Bible is absolutely clear that there is no place for sex before or outside of marriage. And that's the way God intended it.

And that's the way that God reveals His plan and His intention for men and for women. From day one. Therefore let a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh.

[24 : 06] One man, one woman, husband, wife, nothing else. All sexual activity outside of that marriage bond is sinful. It's wrong.

Now that's tough in a world that believes the very opposite, isn't it? It was tough for them in Pergamum and it's tough for us. It's easy in the comfort of a church building like this to remind

ourselves of that but it's more difficult when you're actually out there and when you're having to face the images of pornography and television and satellite TV and the internet.

When you're having to face the trials of temptation in the world or in a secular world which believes in the so-called freedom. Sexual freedom. People in Pergamum it's amazing, isn't it?

There's nothing new under the sun and that they were under the same kind of pressures as we're under in a 21st century church and that was what Jesus had against them.

And may it never be and may it not be that the very the complaint that Jesus brought against the church in Pergamum would be the complaint that he brings against Christians Christians here or Christians in the West.

[25 : 18] So there you have his rebuke but his counsel was in verse 16 to repent. There's always always a place for repentance and every time we come under the power of the word of God there's an opportunity to repent.

God holds his opportunity open to us and there is there is a and he he commands us and he pleads with us and he guides us into a repent a place of repentance.

You know sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that repentance is only for someone who is not a Christian and it's something that they do only once. Well I've been a Christian for decades and I think I repent every day and so should you.

We repent every time we discover something wrong something sinful in our lives in our hearts and in our behaviour. We repent we turn and we change and God the amazing thing is that God God still gives us opportunity.

The amazing thing is that even after years of sinning as a Christian that we can still repent and still come back to him because Jesus is the Lord who forgives seventy times seven.

[26 : 38] So don't give up as a Christian. Don't give up when you discover that you're falling into the same trap or the same sin time after time. Repent because Jesus you know the reason we know we can repent tonight and we know that God welcomes us with his forgiveness is because he commands us to.

That's the most encouraging word that we have in this passage. Repent. if there was no opportunity to repent then he wouldn't be giving us the opportunity. If he wasn't a God of love and of mercy he wouldn't be commanding us to repent.

The very fact that he's commanding us to repent tonight is indicative of his warmth and his grace towards us. So let's be reminded tonight of that grace.

Repent therefore otherwise. There's this terrible terrible word otherwise. I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Now that's the sword of judgment. That's the sword of discipline. The sword by which the Lord Jesus comes to us and he he brings into the open what we are doing and he comes and he reveals his own mind on that situation.

[28 : 00] So but the last thing that he brings to his church is the fourth thing is promise. He ends the letter with a promise and the promise is quite enigmatic it's quite a puzzle let's read it very quickly.

He who has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches to him who overcomes first of all I will give some of the hidden manna. That's the first thing he promises those who overcome. Now what is the hidden manna? Again we have to go back to the Old Testament again to the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness and to the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in which was kept a jar of manna and that manna was the food that God had sent from heaven to sustain the Israelites during their journey in the wilderness but it also was a spiritual lesson it was a kind of bible to the Israelites it was a reminder of the goodness of God but it was also a reminder of God's plan and his purpose for them in sending Jesus Christ the manna was the bread of heaven that came down to give life to the Israelites Jesus in John chapter 6 he declares himself as the bread of heaven again that comes down to give life to the world and so manna represented the Lord

Jesus Christ it spoke to the Israelites of what the Lord Jesus Christ would one day be and what he would come to do to give life to the world and I believe that what Jesus is saying to the church of Pergamum here is this that one day everything that that manna represented about the Lord Jesus Christ will be perfectly revealed to us a lot is still hidden from our eyes a lot we don't understand but one day we will understand and Jesus is promising that those who overcome those who persevere to the end will enjoy an eternity of revelation where we will discover to our joy and to our delight all

of what these things actually mean the second thing he promises them is that I will give him a white stone with a new name written on it now that's probably even more puzzling even more intriguing than the manna what was the white stone and what's the name that's written on it well there are several suggestions given

I want to give you just three of the suggestions I'm just going to leave them with you because the time has come to an end the first suggestion is that the white stone apparently if you were in a court of law in the first century the Roman system and if you were if you were tried in a court of law you were the accused and if you were found to be innocent of the crime you were given a white stone to show your innocence and many people believe that when Jesus promises a white stone to those who overcome is indicative of their status in the Lord Jesus Christ there is therefore now no condemnation says Jesus to those who are in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation we have been set free from sin and its power we have been justified by his grace secondly they tell me that at the games the

[31 : 41] Olympic games the winner was given a white stone again this fits in with the overcoming to him who overcomes and it reminds me of that passage in Hebrews chapter 12 where we are encouraged to run the race with patience looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame and is now set down at the right hand of the majesty on high and we're reminded that we in the Christian life are like running in a race and we have to run with patience we have to throw off the weight and every sin that so easily trips us and tangles us we're to keep our eyes on Jesus and we're to run with perseverance the race that's set before us the white stone reminds us of our of our of how necessary is to run with patience and with perseverance and then lastly the white stone was given to someone with a particular job in the government it indicated his status rather like for example in the old days if you were given a very important job in government your name was written on a glass door in your office your office would have a glass door and your name was etched in the glass and that was a sign of your status there is no higher status in all the world tonight than to be a

Christian to be a child of God to belong to the Lord Jesus Christ to have been adopted into his family and not only does Jesus know our name but he has promised to give us a new name a name that identifies us with the Lord Jesus Christ a new name a new heart a new position a new status a status that he will never take from us a position in which we are called his sons and in which we are reminded of that love that brought us into his family that love in which Jesus gave his life for us and a love which he will never never take away let's overcome then and let's as we go into another week full of all kinds who knows what awaits us this week difficulties questions decisions let's remember who we are let's remain true to the name of the Lord

Jesus Christ let's bow our heads in prayer our Father in heaven we thank you once again for your reminder tonight of who we are in the Lord Jesus Christ we thank you Lord for everything that that white stone represents and for the name that you have given to us we ask oh Lord that you will help us to remember at all times that we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ and who we belong to we serve and we want to obey him we want to glorify him and we want to be like him Lord make us like him we pray in Jesus name Amen let's sing in closing in Psalm 34 from verse 14 to verse 18 34 that's from the traditional version of the Psalm the tune is Wiltshire Psalm 34 from verse 14 to verse 18 depart from ill do good seek peace pursue it earnestly God's eyes are on the just his ears are open to their cry from verse 14 to verse 18 and we'll stand to praise God together depart from ill to good seek peace pursue with earnestly

God's eyes are on their justice years are open to their crime the face of God is set against those that are wicked limb that in me quite are from the earth cut out their memory the righteous cry unto them hear the

Lord he unto them gives ear and they are told their troubles all by him delivered are the Lord is ever nigh to them that be a broken spit to them he safety does afford that are in heart on now may the grace of our

[38 : 00] Lord and Savior Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion and fellowship of the Holy Spirit rest on and abide with each one of you both now and always Amen Amen