

We're currently studying the very last book of the Bible – the Revelation of Jesus Christ. And, it's a tough book.

- Sometimes it's tough to understand, because it uses a lot of imagery.
- Sometimes it's tough, because we will be very deeply challenged, about our walk with God, and our faithfulness to Him. (or lack there-of)
- Sometimes it's tough to accept, because Jesus is very blunt with His judgment
- And it's also tough, because of what it tells us about the tribulation (and persecution) the church will endure, before the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour returns; cuts off history; and makes all things New.

In chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, Jesus is dictating to John, 7 letters to 7 different churches in what they then called “Asia” – we call it “Turkey”. And today we're up to the 3rd letter – the letter to the church at Pergamum. And each week, I've introduced the letters by saying: “Each week as we read these 7 letters, it's going to be like waiting for the mailman to come”, because these letters are not just for the churches in Turkey back in John's day – they're also written for the church of today. And one or more of these letters, are written to us.

And each week as we read these letters, we're going to be asking ourselves the question, “Is today's letter, a letter from Jesus, to us?”:

- Is it a letter to Bush Disciples? ; or
- Is it a letter to one of the churches who are utilising the video in their service today?

- Or, is it a letter to a church of somebody who is listening to this on their iPod?

So, the letter to the church in Pergamum:

Let me read it:

Revelation 2:12–17 (ESV)

To the Church in Pergamum

¹² “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

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. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: 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. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war 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 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.’

When I read the letter to the Church at Pergamum, to me it seems a bit more ‘obscure’ than either of the two letters we’ve already read... The first 2 letters haven’t been very difficult to understand – and neither is this one really – it’s actually quite **clear** in what it’s saying – it’s just the **way** it says it:

There's an Old Testament Scripture reference where we don't get the **full** story, and so we've got to do a bit of digging to see what it's all about (and even **then** we don't get the whole picture). And then there's imagery of white stones and secret names written on stones, that are a bit "out there".... But don't lose heart – the **main** message is **very** clear.

So, as with the other letters, Jesus begins by giving a description of Himself.

'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.'

If you can remember back to chapter 1 where John described Jesus, He had a sharp two-edged sword, coming from His mouth... (sounds terrifying)

In Ephesians 6:17, it talks about "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"

Hebrews 4:¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Alright, so when it describes Jesus as having a two-edged sword, and we know it comes from His mouth, what's it telling us?

Jesus' words, are the words of God Himself. And sometimes, Jesus' words will cut us so deep. Nothing is hidden from Jesus' sight – He knows everything about us. Which can be a bit daunting really, because it is Jesus, to whom we must give an account. And with His words, Jesus has power and authority, to judge.

And what Jesus has to say to this church in Pergamum, will cut individuals within that church, very deeply. And it's also a challenge to the church itself, to deal with issues, that have gone unaddressed in the fellowship – Doctrinal issues (that is about their religious belief and practice), and Moral issues (lifestyle choices, that are not appropriate for disciples of Jesus).

Now, I want you to take note – **this is very important** – the reason **why** Jesus' words are so very cutting:::

He's **not** saying these things out of spite or vindictiveness – He says these words to the church, to let them know, how critical it is for them to repent. ... And if the Word of God is cutting deep into **you** today, I want you to hear this: The purpose is not “To leave you feeling hopeless and worthless and unloved, judged and condemned”.... The purpose is, to lead you to repentance. This is not your final judgment – it's a warning – “Repent, before the day of judgment comes.”

OK, but we're getting ahead of ourselves. Before we get to the warning, Jesus has some **good** things to say to the Church in Pergamum...

Let's set the scene:

The city of Pergamum, was well-known in the Ancient world for several things:

1. It had an enormous library. It was said to contain over 200 000 parchment scrolls. And apparently our word “parchment” is derived from the word “Pergamum”ⁱ
2. Secondly, it was famous for its many temples to all sorts of gods, including:
 - Zeus
 - Dionysus
 - Athene
3. But probably most notable (and most consequential for the church), was the city’s dedication to ‘Caesar worship’.

As early as 29BC, Pergamum had built a temple, dedicated to Romeⁱⁱ. And over time, they’d built even more temples for the worship of Caesar. It appears that, more than any city in its region, they were **devoted** to worshipping Caesar.

And Jesus said: ¹³ “ **I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.**

Now, if Satan is the one who is responsible for the persecution of the church (which he is), and if, in **this** region, that persecution was because Christians refused to participate in Emperor worship, And if this very city of Pergamum, was recognised as being the **centre** of Emperor worship, it’s not hard to understand the analogy: **you dwell, where Satan's throne is.**

The city of Pergamum, was devoted to Emperor worship. And anyone who wouldn’t join in – and especially anyone who firmly stood apart from it, got more than threats.

At least one of them (Antipas) had already been killed because he refused to bow down to Caesar... *And the Bible doesn't tell us this, but legend has it, that Antipas was roasted inside a Brazen Bull*ⁱⁱⁱ. (A brass oven, in the shape of a bull. The victim would be locked inside, and a fire would be lit to heat the oven).

(By the way, are you catching the significance of this – to bow before Caesar as a god, is to bow to the throne of Satan. And that can go for any false god).

But Jesus congratulated them as a church, because even though they were in a place that was so satanic in its belief, culture and practice, yet they held fast to faith in the name of Jesus.

It must have been so tough for them, but they did not give up on their faith in Jesus.

But it wasn't all congratulations for the church at Pergamum. Jesus went on to say this:

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: 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.

Right'o, let's divide this into the clear "What we know from the letter itself", and then what we can learn, by digging deeper into the Old Testament.

From the letter itself, we discover that there were false teachers, putting forth the subtle temptation to assimilate with their society. You can imagine it, can't you?

- “If everybody’s eating meat which has been sacrificed to other gods, then why can’t we do it too?” (We’re not actually worshipping them ourselves) How can that hurt...
- And if just about everybody else is having sex before they get married, well that’s just what modern society does – what’s the harm in us doing it too????

Alright, so the stumbling blocks for them were:

- a) Dabbling in the worship of idols, by eating meat that’s been sacrificed to them; and
- b) The **practice sexual immorality**.

And this is where it gets a little bit unclear. The phrase “practice sexual immorality”, is one word in the original Greek (πορνείσαι·porneusai) from the root word (πορνεύω porneuo) from which we get our word “pornography”.

The Greek word can mean: Fornication (pre-marital sex); prostitution; and it’s also been used to describe all sorts of sexual immorality; and sometimes it’s even used as an allusion to idolatry... e.g. the people are supposed to be faithful to God, but they prostitute themselves by turning to other gods...

So, how is the phrase being used here? Is it simply being used as another way of saying “You’re worshipping idols – you’re prostituting yourselves”... Or were there some in that church, who were fornicating, or practicing some other kind of sexual immorality.

Well, I actually think it's probably both. As one commentary puts it: *Feasting on sacrificial meat and licentious conduct were usual accompaniments of the worship of idols, both in Old and New Testament times^{iv}*. And the truth of the matter is, some of the heathen temples had cult prostitutes, and sexual immorality was all part of worshipping those gods.

And many times throughout the history of the church, the gentile Christians (non-Jewish Christians) would be told, the only rules they really had to keep, was not to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, and to refrain from sexual immorality. That is what would set them apart from the rest of the world in which they lived.

So, it seems that the sin of the church in Pergamum, was the opposite to the sin of the church in Ephesus. Do you remember the church in Ephesus? Jesus congratulated them because they wouldn't put up with any false teaching in **their** church – no watering down anything here... But then Jesus absolutely ripped them to shreds because they'd lost their love... Alright, it was a church that had all of its legalities firm and fixed (this is what we believe. We will not shift from it; this is how we do things here), but they'd lost their love. And Jesus said to them, if you don't love, you're not my people – you're not my church...

That was in Ephesus, but now here in Pergamum, we have a church who Jesus is chastising because they **have** allowed deceptive teaching in their church. And some are being led astray by it.

How does that happen? Why are there so many people, who claim to be Christians, and they might even be quite **open** about their faith, and yet the way they live, has little or no difference to the rest of the world around them????

Drunkenness; foul language; rude jokes;

Why is it not uncommon for Christians to be sexually active before they're married, and some even live together before they're married? Why are churches beginning to bless, or marry, same-sex couples???? How do we get such a subtle shift over time, which becomes a radical shift over the space of a couple of decades?

And this is where I want to take us to the Old Testament, to learn about the sin of Balaam.

We learn about Balaam in the book of Numbers. And for a start, it's quite difficult to work out, "Is Balaam a goody or a baddy?" Is this bloke a prophet of God? or is he relying on demonic powers, to discern the future??? It's actually quite hard to tell.

He seems to be a prophet for hire, and Balak sends money to him, to get him to come and bless his armies and to curse the armies of Israel... But Balaam says, "Just let me consult YHWH first (and YHWH is God's personal name – that is the LORD our God whom we worship)

And so Balaam consults YHWH^v. And YHWH our God, actually speaks to him^{vi}.

And so it **seems** that we've got this **Godly** prophet, who's in close contact with God... But then as the story unfolds, we realise that Balaam is working against God. In fact God says "**Your way is perverse before me**". Some of you may remember the story of Balaam and his donkey. I don't have time to tell you this whole story now, but I'd encourage you, when you go home, read Numbers 22, 23 & 24.... And you'll get a bit of a picture of what I mean – is this man serving God or not? Sometimes it seems he is, and sometimes it seems he's not.

But it's only when we get to chapter 25, ^{Numbers 25:1} **While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore (Septuagint – ἐκπορνεῦσαι) with the daughters of Moab. ² These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³ So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.**

And then we go all the way forward to Numbers 31, before we learn that Balaam's advice, was the cause of the people's rebellion against God.

So it **seems** like Balaam was God's prophet, but underneath, he's working against God... The advice that he gave? Get the men of Israel, to marry the idolatrous daughters of Moab. Once you get their hearts, they'll turn from God and turn to Baal...

By the way, young people, there's something I want you to learn from this: A Christian, should never even consider

dating a non-Christian. The purpose of dating, is to decide, whether a person is suitable to marry or not. And if that person is not a Christian, well you've already got your answer. "No. They're not a suitable person to marry." So don't tempt yourself by beginning to date them.

The Scriptures say "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers"; "What partnership has righteousness and lawlessness?" "What fellowship has light and darkness".

One preacher said, *"If you marry a child of the devil, you're always going to have trouble with your father-in-law."* And that is so true.

So anyway, back to the church at Pergamum... Does that picture of Balaam, give you some kind of idea of how false teaching subtly makes its way into a church?

False teachers are dangerous, when they have every appearance of being Godly. If a false teacher was to turn up at this church, and start teaching things like: *"Jesus didn't die for your sins. Jesus didn't rise from the dead. It's fine for you to pray to Buddha. After church, we're all going to take a different wife or a different husband home."* Straight away, you'd pick up, "I think this person might be a false teacher." ... And so a false teacher like that isn't very dangerous.

The ones who **are** dangerous are the ones who **seem** very reasonable:

- the ones who **seem** godly;
- they might come across as being very spiritually gifted;

- they might have a very powerful and convincing way with words;
- And **most** of what they say, might be **true**...
- It might seem that they're speaking the word of God Himself...
- And you might've personally found them, to be very helpful...

But the whole time, beneath the surface, they're gently introducing compromise... And that's what had happened at Pergamum. Compromise that led people to believe that it's OK to touch on the edges of idol worship; compromise that let them to believe that it was OK for them to sleep with their boyfriend or girlfriend... . . . And this is what Jesus held against them.

Idolatry and immorality – but I suspect these, are an example of subtle compromise.

Once again, the Nicolaitans pop up – The Nicolaitans taught that it's OK be a Christian and also to accept other gods on the side.

So, what were they to do about it? Well, this is the wonderful thing with our Lord: The Lord our God, is always very quick to forgive, if only we will repent... And He gives a pretty harsh warning to do so:

He says, If you don't repent, **I will come to you** (the church), **and war against them** (meaning the false teachers and those who have been compromising because of them) **with the sword of my mouth**... Alright, how can that be

anything but an image of judgment? “If you don’t repent, I will judge you.”

But judgment will come, only to those who don’t repent. What about those who do?

Well, those who **do** repent **and** those who have remained faithful, receive forgiveness and eternal life.

¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers (repents / stays faithful) 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.'

What Jesus is saying, is clear. What’s **not** clear, is what these specific images are about. He’s clearly talking about eternity. With repentance comes forgiveness and eternal blessing.

What about the hidden manna: Don’t know what that means. But we know that manna is food and sustenance from God Himself. And in a world where it was hard for them to find meat that **hadn’t** been sacrificed to an idol, Jesus is saying “You might be hungry now, but in glory, you won’t go hungry.”

What about the white stone: Don't know. In Revelation, white is the symbol of purity. The significance of the stone? I don't know. We could guess, but I won't.

with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it. Have you ever noticed the way Jesus sometimes changed people's names?

You see, a name, is really important. Biblically, a name goes to the very identity of who the person is. So, when Jesus gave Simon the name "Peter", Jesus was saying "You're going to be a rock" – that's what Peter means. And that was laughable at the time. Peter was anything but a rock. Even on the night that Jesus was arrested, he denied Jesus three times before morning....

But on the day of Pentecost, when Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, he became that rock.

And this is what we need to know. This is what we **all** need to know – when we repent, and Jesus Christ forgives us, we are no longer the people we once used to be. You may have once used to have been a fornicator; You may have once been an idolater; you may be somebody who has a history of compromise (either morally, or spiritually)...

But when you repent, and God forgives, you become a different person – you have a different identity.

And other people may continue to see you as that old person – ah he'll never be any good – that woman – No, she's damaged goods – she's used goods... That might be how others see

you, but not God. He gives you a new identity – a new identity in Christ.. And on that day when He returns, you will be standing with Him, pure and holy in your white garments; rejoicing that He has held you firm, for all eternity.

Can you see how this is important – not just for individuals, but for the whole church to know??? When someone repents, they are forgiven, and they receive a new identity in Christ.

In that church in Pergamum, some had remained faithful; Some had compromised.

How could those who had remained faithful, ever trust the ones who had compromised, ever again??? Well they couldn't, unless they understood, that by the repentance of the individuals, and the forgiveness and the mercy of God, they are no longer who they once used to be.

Let's pray,
Lord Jesus Christ, sometimes your words cut very deep.
And we thank you Lord, that at this point, your words are not to condemn, but to lead us to repentance.
And Lord, by Your Holy Spirit, we pray that you would convict us of our compromise. Lord, that you would reveal false teaching in Your church, and that we would not tolerate it.

Lord, I pray for individuals, who **have** compromised their Christian faith, and who wish now to repent.
Lord, I ask that you would open the way forwards for them, that they would yield their very lives to you – every part of it, to be wholly, completely, and uncompromisingly, Yours.

And Lord, we have all had need of repentance,
We've all experienced Your grace and mercy, and
forgiveness.

Lord, thank you that when we turn from our sin, You forgive
us, and give us a new identity.

And Lord, I pray for us as a church – that we would be quick
to recognise, the new identity that we have all found in Christ.
Lord, that we would recognise that we are all forgiven sinners,
standing by Your mercy alone.

And Lord, as by your grace, we seek to be a church who do
not compromise, on what we believe, and how we behave,
Please let us never become like the church at Ephesus, who
lost their love.

We pray this in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord,
Amen.

ⁱ Morris L. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries – Revelation. Inter-Varsity Press,
Leicester. 1987. (p.65)

ⁱⁱ Morris L. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries – Revelation. Inter-Varsity Press,
Leicester. 1987. (p.65)

ⁱⁱⁱ Morris L. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries – Revelation. Inter-Varsity Press,
Leicester. 1987. (p.66)

^{iv} Morris L. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries – Revelation. Inter-Varsity Press,
Leicester. 1987. (p.67)

^v Numbers 22:8

^{vi} Numbers 22:12