

Pergamum

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Date: 05 June 2011

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[0 : 00] Let's look at this evening at Revelation, chapter two, and the message that God gives to the church in Pergamum. I've heard of something several times recently, and it makes me laugh a little bit inside.

It's when people, and it's a kind of, it's a minister's kind of thing to laugh at. You probably wouldn't laugh at it at all. But it's to do with church planting. I've heard quite a lot of people recently talking about church planting as the latest fad in the church, as if it's kind of a newfangled idea that we've just thought about.

It's a good idea. We should plant some churches. Maybe that's how the church should grow. And I always think that's quite an interesting summary of church planting that people would see as faddish, something that's just, well, come and go until the next fad comes along.

Because it seems to me very clear that church planting's entirely New Testament and entirely biblical, and that's what Paul was doing in all his journeys. He was planting churches.

And that's what I would like us to be doing in Edinburgh as time goes on, that we would be planting churches in Edinburgh, not just content with belonging to the church here, because as we know, probably less than 2% of the city go to church at all.

[1 : 22] And it's not that we're exclusively interested in having more people going to church per se, but we believe that as churches are planted and the word of God is spread, then the kingdom will grow.

And so I'd like to see lots of churches. They might not look like this. They certainly wouldn't have the kind of building that we're in and very hopefully not the electrical problems that we have as well.

But we believe in church planting, and it'd be great when only 2% of the city go to any kind of church or of any kind of Christian faith that we are reaching out with the gospel. And church planting's a great way to do that.

It's a great way to work into communities. It's a great way to sharpen up our own faith. It's a great way to blow away the cobwebs and to stop institutionalization, to stop us becoming complacent, and to fire us back onto the front line with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul's times, I know they were difficult and I know they had their own issues. But it was great times as well. And it was amazing things that happened as the Holy Spirit was poured out and as Paul went on his missionary journeys.

[2 : 34] And we are led to believe through our study of God's word and of the history of the time that Paul's first journey, part of that journey would have been from Lister to Troas, which was on the coast, where he would have passed through Pergamum.

And in all likelihood, stayed there for a while. And a church, whether through, it was through Paul's influence or other Christians who'd moved into the area from Pentecost, maybe there was Christians who, or people who became Christians at Pentecost, moved back to Pergamum.

But we know that there was a church and here is a letter, a number of years later, to this church in Pergamum. And God, Jesus calls it a place where Satan has its throne.

So it wasn't a very godly city. It wasn't one where you would maybe say, well, that's a good place to plant a church. I know a lot of really nice people there that are predisposed to the gospel. They might, they would make really nice Christians or good people there.

It wasn't like that. It was a city that had no time for the morality of God and the morality of the gospel and the truth of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 45] It was an idolatrous city. There was many different idol worshiping sects who were in Pergamum and it was, by biblical standards, it was a highly immoral city and it was maybe you look at a place like that and say, I'm not sure if I would find it easy to live there as a Christian.

I'm not sure it's the kind of place I would want to plant a church. But that's just the place where the gospel was needed and it's just the place where this church was born and was fashioned.

And please don't feel that when we're talking about the church, we're talking about something that is not personal. The church is you and me.

The church is the individuals that make up the people who believe in Jesus Christ and who come together to worship in any one place. What great courage so Paul had and what great vision for the gospel and what great passionate belief and faith he had in the living power of Jesus to transform people's lives that he would preach the gospel in a place like Pergamum but that's what he did.

And it would be great to know some of that. I would love to have some of that cavalier and simple and powerful and courageous faith in Jesus Christ that would give me the confidence that Paul had to reach out and to share the good news of the gospel to a people who might on the face of it appear very unproductive in their response to the gospel.

[5 : 25] But we do know from what Jesus says here to the church that it was a genuine and a true church that was built. These are the words of him who was a 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 twice.

He mentions that this city is a place where Satan lives, a place really where he says that there's palpable evil there. It's a place where it's enthroned as it were by anti-Christian philosophy and feeling and thinking.

And yet Jesus says in this place where my enemy resides, where his philosophy and his way of thinking and all the selfishness that goes with that, he says there is a true church, a church that is true to my name.

And that's good that here where Jesus Christ is speaking to the church, where Jesus is looking into the city, he is able to commend the church.

[6 : 33] He's able to say of the Christians that they have kept the faith, that they have been steadfast. This is not the summary views of a visiting church committee of what we have every five years in the free church, a quinquennial visitation from the Presbytery.

This is the word of God. This is the message from Jesus to his people. You have kept the faith, you've remained true to my name. Jesus regards that as valuable, as significant, as important in very difficult circumstances.

It wasn't easy for them to be Christians. They didn't get any encouragement to be Christians. They were surrounded by temptation and difficulty, yet they were able to remain true and persevere and didn't renounce their faith in Jesus Christ.

They had metal, they were brave, they were loyal. Christ sees them and thanks them and commends them for their faith.

And we should in our lives be looking for the same commendation from God in our lives as Christians. It's a good thing to persevere in the Christian faith.

[8 : 03] There's very many temptations for us to give up, to walk away, to lower our standards, to disbelieve, to ignore the living God.

But he wants us as we come to him and as we seek the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit to be those who remain true to Jesus Christ.

And I'm asking you this evening in your workplace, in your college, your university, your home, wherever you are, you're remaining loyal to Jesus Christ.

A very significant challenge for us. As time goes on, it's easier to loosen our loyalty. And can I say that from the place of, and I am sad to confess and admit this, the place of middle age, it's easy to loosen your standards.

It's easy, it's very easy. Can I go on to say, even to the older people, it's easy to finish badly. We think sometimes that the great tension and the difficulties in our Christian lives are in the early days.

[9 : 18] And the young people here are struggling with all kinds of issues and battles and that's true. You're sharpened and you're energetic, you're sharp in your minds and your hearts and Christ can be close to you, but as time goes on, it's easy to loosen.

It's easy to let the standards fall. It's easy not to persevere, it's easy to become flabby spiritually. Lack discipline and self-control and the love that goes with that.

And so this great commendation from Jesus is one for us all to remind ourselves of and to be encouraged to do to remain true to Jesus Christ, not to renounce our faith in Him.

And that's very significant as time goes on because we could see in this church and to a greater or lesser degree, these are opposition, our attacks that we face in our Christian lives.

We see the satanic attack on the kingdom of God and the work of God in two specific areas that are highlighted in this letter to the church in Pergam. Satan is clearly unhappy with the fact that there are believers in his city as it were, where he has his throne.

[10 : 33] And so there's attacks on the church and Jesus knows about that and highlights this and challenges the church not to give in to these things. The first is persecution and the second is seduction.

So Satan attacks kind of from outside and also attacks from inside. He challenges and tries to break us down in these two ways.

And persecution is very much one of the ways he tried to destroy this church. And it's quite interesting really, you would think and you would think that Satan would learn his lesson through maybe it was early on in his understanding, but right through history, the persecuted church has actually been the strongest church, the most muscular church, the most committed church.

But maybe in different places, in different ways, he sees that and attacks accordingly. But persecution is one way in which he seeks to get Christians to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ.

And we know that this church was persecuted and was a persecuted church. Jesus mentions one person, Antipas, who was a faithful witness and he was put to death in that city for Satan lives, for his faith.

[12 : 02] So there was real physical, tangible, overt persecution of Christians in that city. And that must have the death of Antipas and others who were persecuted for faith must have been a real temptation for the believers to succumb to, to reject this newfound faith they had because of the fear of persecution, the fear factor, where the cost of discipleship in this city was just too high for them, where they could see their lives being wrecked, their place in society being taken from them, maybe having built it up over many years and that being removed from them.

And persecution and destruction and hatred and opposition is very often a way in which we are tempted to and Satan will tempt us to give up our Christian faith.

But we know that within that temptation, generally speaking, they remain true, even to martyrdom. This was a people in the early church who had counted the cost of being a Christian.

There weren't any casualties in that church, in Pergamum. Wasn't any people there just going along for the ride?

Christ was very real to them and they were willing to succumb, or they were willing to overcome temptation to give up their faith in the midst of persecution, although Satan attacked them in this way.

[13 : 50] And today, there's not the same overt persecution for you being a Christian. But there is a fear factor.

And maybe this evening, many of us are afraid of standing up for Jesus Christ, afraid of mockery, afraid of derision, or afraid of just making that stand at all for Jesus.

We're sitting on the edges of commitment, but we're afraid of the cost of standing up and professing faith in Jesus Christ.

We're afraid that there will be no turning back for us. And we're afraid of what it will mean personally in our lives to give ourselves to Jesus Christ.

Well, there's a spiritual battle for your soul. And when we're tempted to be afraid, when we're tempted to remain silent for Christ, remember what we were saying last week about the Holy Spirit, about how the Holy Spirit enables us to witness, to share the gospel.

[15 : 02] And if we're tempted not to do that, then remember there's a battle going on for our soul, spiritual battle, and Satan would wish us to be fearful and to be oppressed and to be downcast and to be silent before Him.

Fiction eyes on Jesus Christ, the author and perfect of your faith. If at the moment you're only clinging on because you're afraid of what it might cost to witness and share Jesus Christ, I wonder what would it be like if we were in days of genuine persecution?

So persecution is one attack which didn't seem to be particularly successful in the church in Pergamum because we know they remain faithful and we know that there was people who were even willing to give up their life in order to remain faithful to Jesus.

But within the church, and probably Satan was more effective in this as Jesus exposes it here, it is with the temptation to seduction.

Much more subtle, probably much more relevant to us as a church today. In the society, the secular world in which we live and the nature of that society in which we live, where we are attacked and it is tempting for us to loosen our faith by becoming just the same as everyone else around us.

[16 : 34] The temptation, the seduction just to be the same, to be like everyone else, to have the same ambitions, the same morality, the same points of contact, the same way of thinking and being tempted to move away from Jesus and his way and his teaching.

And that's really what is spoken about here when generally really, Jesus says, nevertheless, I have a few things against you. You have people who you presumably allow within the church to hold this valid position, hold to the teachings of Balaam who talked, Balaak to entice Israelites to sin by eating food committed, sacrificed idols and committing sexual immorality.

Also, you have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitians. So there was kind of theological distractions within the congregation attacking the truth of God's word and attacking the truth of God's morality.

And there's kind of two areas here that are spoken about. One is idolatry and the other is sexual immorality. And these are two areas that are focused on here as being areas where Jesus is unhappy with the church, that they're allowing truth to be distilled and to be not so clear and not so strong, but diluted in a very real way.

So Satan was tempting them to say, why just Jesus? Why just Jesus is Lord? That was one of the really difficult things for the secular world in the city of a place like Pergamum to understand.

[18 : 33] The Christians would say that Jesus alone is Lord, that they couldn't worship other idols and other gods and Roman emperors and things like that.

And rather that they were giving into syncretism, that they were giving into duality, into different kinds of religion, all mixed in together idolatry.

Don't be exclusivist, don't be narrow in your thinking. That was kind of what Balem seemed to be encouraging the people of the Jews of his day to engage in idolatry and all that went along with that.

In a day of emperor worship, why is Jesus the only Lord? And we need to fight against that thinking. Not that I don't think many people here think we can worship other gods.

And we don't believe in interfaith journeys, journeys where all roads lead to the one God. But nonetheless, we need to remain true to the lordship of Jesus in our lives and the exclusivity of Jesus and the primacy of Jesus and the priority of Jesus as Lord in our lives.

[19 : 56] That he comes first, not first equal. Not second, but first in his lordship. That we, against all kinds of theological error and secular thinking, we retain the truth that Jesus is Lord in our lives, in our workplace, in our honesty, in our decision making, that Jesus Christ is Lord and he's Lord of our lives and that we will not share him with another.

And that is a significant and important area of living that we recognize the uniqueness of who he is.

Otherwise, we diminish him and Calvary and the uniqueness of the atonement. Because if you're Christ and if my Christ is hardly with you, Christ and if my Christ is hardly worth living for, we're certainly not gonna die for him.

And the question is, is he worth living for? Do we live for him? Do we compromise and love and share our hearts with another? Because here we find Jesus having this against the people that they were willing to count an inside doletry, denying the exclusivity of Jesus.

I'm not saying that was easy. I don't think it's easy for them to remain exclusive and it's not easy for us, but we need to recognize that this is one way that Satan will make our faith ineffective and make us struggle.

[21 : 40] And the other one very simply is one that he constantly comes up with. It's why bother, why bother or why just your religion?

Why just Jesus is one temptation? Well, then it was why bother with a holy life? I think that's really prevalent today. Why bother with a holy life?

Surely we don't need to be moral people. Surely we don't need to live by a different code. Surely it's about love and it's about loving God and loving Jesus and how we live their lives.

Is that not just moralism? No, it's not simply moralism. It's a recognition of his lordship and of his model and pattern for living.

People don't really know, as far as I can make it, the commentators aren't exactly sure of the teachings of the Niculations, but it seems to be that it was connected with the teachings of Belac.

[22 : 43] They advocated compromise, especially in morality. You can believe in Jesus, but why you can go to the shrine prostitute as well? It doesn't really matter about your morality because will you forgive you anyway?

You don't need to be different. Forget being separate. Society has changed. Move on. Just accept Christ as your lord and the kind of the spiritual area of your life, but it doesn't affect your morality and it doesn't need to affect your morality.

You don't need to worry about a holy life. That's just for those who are either fanatical or who misunderstand the Bible's teachings.

The kind of idea that might come across today, I love Jesus, but I hate his commands. We don't need his commands today. We just love one another. Of course, love has structured, doesn't it?

And love has parameters. Love in marriage has parameters. Love in families has parameters. And the love of God surely has parameters because there's no such thing as absolute freedom for us, is there?

[23 : 57] Now, that our alleged freedom is someone else's slavery. We recognize and know and understand the importance, surely, of a holy life as Christians.

Repent, therefore, from this life of sexual immorality. Surely, there's probably no greater challenge and temptation from Satan today to the church, from within, to have a low and loose morality, to disregard his standards, to enjoy the freedoms of technological age, which allows immorality.

Straight into our living room, 100 different ways. And we can lower our standard and lower our concern, our care to such a degree that we have shrunk Jesus to insignificance in our lives, that he has no lordship over our thinking, over our sexuality, over our morality, over our thinking, over our behavior, over our choices.

And yet Jesus here is challenging the church and saying, I've got this against you. You know? I commend you for your faithfulness, but it's faithfulness on one hand, but on the other hand, you're holding to a morality that is impure and not what I would have for you.

And the encouragement from Jesus here is to turn back to him. If we're not getting our moral standards from Jesus, where are we getting them from?

[25 : 47] If we're not getting them from Christ, then our back is turned to Christ. And we're receiving and taking our moral standards from the world around us. And from all that we're seeing and all that we're imbibing and soaking into our thinking.

So if we're not facing Jesus, then we will find it hard to understand and to embrace his morality for our lives. So Christ says, repent, turn round, change.

Because you're in Satan's lap when we choose to reject or ignore the life and the newness and the transformation that the Holy Spirit breathes into our hearts.

Don't allow compromise to lessen your effectiveness for the gospel. Because it's difficult for us, isn't it, to say that Jesus brings newness and he brings transformation and he brings hope.

If our life to all intents and purposes, maybe apart from the fact that we go to church on a Sunday, is a life where we're getting drunk, where we're immoral, where we're sleeping around, where we're abandoning him on his day, when we're gambling, where we're dishonest.

[27 : 04] You know, if we're just doing all these things, then we ask ourselves, what makes us Christ-like? What is Christ-likeness?

Good question to ask. What is it? What it is, is what we imitate. And that goes for all of us. That goes for the very youngest here.

We're not exempt from that challenge to be Christ-like in our thinking, in our speech, in our actions, in the way we respond to people, in our generosity, in our openness, in our love, and not bullying, and loving them, and not being bitter, and not gossiping, not lying, not cheating.

All of these things, very unpopular to speak about these things today. But we recognize and see that that's where the fruit of the Spirit comes in, and moulds us and changes us to make us like Jesus in our lives.

And each of us has that challenge to turn to the living God, recognizing that if we don't, that there's a double-edged sword that Jesus holds in his hand, a sort of discipline, where He will take us to that one.

[28 : 17] We've been seeing that in Joel, taking us to that place, where if we will not see that need, He will bring circumstances into our life that will draw us to Him again, to change the desires of our hearts.

So it's not about outward living, really. Although outward living is what we see. It's about changing our hearts to desire Him and His way.

And that only comes as we turn to Him and look for Him to change our desires, so that we'll live His way. We're encouraged to listen, aren't we?

Hear, He was an ear. Let Him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. That's very important that we are a people who are listening to what the Spirit is saying.

Spirit is in our lives, it's in our hearts. Every believer is the Holy Spirit of God. And we're to listen to the Spirit of God through the word, through our conscience that is being molded by the word, listen to what He has to say, and respond to Him, and seek to overcome and persevere.

[29 : 32] And He gives us a couple of promises at the end, and I can't guarantee that this is the right interpretation of these promises, because it's a wee bit mysterious. But He says, when we do overcome, I will give some of the hidden manna.

There's different interpretations of what this might be, but certainly John 6 and verse 32, we have the words of Jesus Himself, who says, I tell you the truth, it's not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, that is the manna, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven, for the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

Jesus being Himself, the manna of God, the bread of life, and in a sense, He's promising Himself to His church the inexhaustible provision of resources to live the way He wants us to live, the health and the life and the food and the sustenance.

How do we carry on? Dunes are difficult, I find Dunes a difficult month, they're tired, I think a lot of you are tired as well. Temptations, we just feel like giving up, giving in, walking away.

Where are we gonna get the resources? Couple of weeks in Tenerife, well, it'll certainly help, but I don't think that's where we will find our resources. Spiritually, we find them in our exhaustion from the living God.

[31 : 02] He provides us with the hidden manna. No comparison to Satan's grubby trinkets that we're so often tempted to indulge in and engage with, but we need to be engaged with the living God, we need to be speaking to Him, praying to Him.

In His company, finding out and knowing about Him and receiving the hidden manna, receiving the bread of life, the living God in our hearts and souls.

That's one of His promises. And then there's even more kind of obscure example here, or picture, I will give Him a white stone with a new name on it known only to Him who receives it.

There's numerous different interpretations, I don't know which one's right, I'll not know till heaven. But one is that in Pergamum, there seem to be whether it was a kind of social thing or economic thing, I'm not sure, but there seem to be little stones, white stones of friendship, that people could have as almost part of a social group and there was an inscription on these stones and you could get into anyone's house if you had this credit card, if you had this stone.

And it seemed to be some kind of social network, there you go, some kind of social network that people could be part of a group together.

[32 : 33] And it would seem that when people became Christians in Pergamum, it might well have been that that social networking stone was taken from them, that they were ostracised from polite company, that they didn't have the network of friends, they were shunned because of their faith and Jesus may well be saying here, well look, I will give him a white stone with a new name written on it, we'll know me till who receives it.

And that withdrawal, that the cost of being a Christian, the withdrawal from friendship of the world was replaced with a friendship with Jesus Christ that is solid.