

## YET YOU REMAIN TRUE TO MY NAME

Revelation 2:12-17

Key Verse: 2:13

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

In this letter to the church of Pergamum, Jesus first commends the believers there for remaining true to his name. They were surrounded by the culture of idol worship and emperor worship. Yet they did not renounce their faith in Jesus. Still, they had some internal issues to overcome, just as we do. May the Lord speak to us personally as we study this letter of Jesus!

### I. TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM (12-13)

Look at verse 12. *“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.* Pergamum (or Pergamus) was an important city of Mysia in the Roman province of Asia Minor. The city was built on a hill 1,000 feet above the surrounding countryside, creating a natural fortress. It was a sophisticated city, a center of Greek culture and education, with a great library that held 200,000 books. (Parchment was invented and produced here, which reduced the dependency on papyrus produced in Alexandria. This led to a tremendous increase in book publications throughout Asia and Europe). Pergamum was also a center of emperor worship (“where Satan has his throne”). The first temple dedicated to the emperor was built in this city among all cities in Asia. They also worshiped four mythological gods, Zeus (god of the sky and thunder), Dionysus (wine), Asclepius (healing), and Athena (war). The city rivaled Ephesus in its worship of idols. The city’s chief god was Asclepius, whose symbol was a serpent and who was considered the god of healing (That’s why you see a serpent on medical emblems even today). People from all over the world came to Pergamum to seek healing from this god.

The Bible does not tell us when the church in Pergamum was planted and by whom. The Apostle Paul passed through the region of Mysia during his second missionary journey (Ac 16:7-8). But Luke does not say if Paul preached the gospel in Pergamum. During his third missionary journey, Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years, raising disciples in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Acts 19:10 says that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” It is possible that the church in Pergamum was established during this period.

Look at verse 12 again. *“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”* To the believers of Pergamum, Jesus identified himself as the one who has “the sharp, double-edged sword.” Why? Earlier, Jesus had introduced himself to the church of Ephesus as the one “who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” It was because Jesus wanted them to be aware that he was with them in

the city full of idol worship and immorality. He wanted them to restore their first love. To the church of Smyrna, Jesus identified himself as “the First and the Last who died and came to life again.” It was because the believers in Smyrna had to endure death threats everyday because of their faith in Jesus. They needed to hold on to Jesus who is the Creator God, the giver of their lives. This time, Jesus wanted the Christians in Pergamum to know that his words are like the sharp, double-edged sword. It was because they were surrounded by idol worshipers who believed that their mythological gods would protect them and bless them. Likewise, the emperor worshipers hoped that the Roman emperor would do the same. Within the church, there were false teachers who enticed and misled believers to sin. They really needed to stick to the word of truth. Jesus told them that his words are like the sharp, double-edged sword.

We also live in a society where people are attracted to many ideas but not interested in the word of Christ. Francis Chan, a pastor in California, said, “If Jesus had a church here (in Simi Valley), mine would be bigger.” It’s his critical assessment that Jesus’ original preaching would not be very popular to people today. The words of Christ are old and uninteresting to them. They would rather turn to something new or interesting. But the word of God is the word of life. Like Peter did, we should also confess, “Lord, to whom what we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). Hebrews 4:12 says: “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

Look at verse 13. *I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.* Jesus first praised the faith of the believers in Pergamum. They were surrounded by worship of Satan and the Roman emperor, but they remained true to Jesus’ name. Even when Antipas, a faithful witness of Jesus in the city, was put to death, they refused to renounce their faith in Jesus. Who was Antipas? We know only a few things about him. He lived in Pergamum. He was a faithful witness to Jesus. And he was put to death for his faith. Tradition says that he was a disciple of the Apostle John who appointed him to be a leader in the church during the time of the Roman emperor Domitian. He was burned alive around 92 AD in a giant copper pot shaped like a bull which was used for pagan worship.

Throughout the history, there have been many believers who were martyred for their faith in Jesus. It is estimated that over 50 million Christians died for their faith in the Dark Ages. Over 1 million Chinese Christians died when the Communists seized China. Very often these believers could have saved their lives if they simply renounced Jesus. During the English Reformation, John Hooper (ca. 1500-1555) was an Anglican Bishop of Gloucester during the Marian Persecutions. As he was about to be executed, his persecutors offered a pardon upon his recantation, saying, “Consider that life is sweet and death is bitter.” Do you know what his response was? He said, “It is true, but the death to come is more bitter, and the life to come is more sweet.” The one common denominator of all the martyrs in history is their hope in the eternal kingdom of God.

It must have been horrible for the believers in Pergamum to watch their leader being roasted in a pot. And yet, they remained true to Jesus' name. They did not renounce their faith in Jesus. Their faith was pleasing to the Lord.

## II. REPENT THEREFORE! (14-17)

Many Christians in Pergamum were steadfast in their faith in Jesus. But this does not mean all of them remained true to Jesus' name. Indeed, some of them in the church had serious problems that broke Jesus' heart. Look at verses 14-15. *Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* Instead of holding on to the teachings of Jesus, some of them held to the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. They abandoned the word of God and turned to false teachings.

The story of Balaam and Balak is found in Numbers 22-25. After wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. Balak the king of Moab was alarmed to see how the people of Israel defeated the Amorites and wanted to avoid the same fate. He sent his representatives to Balaam, a prophet from Pethor near the Euphrates River, asking him to put a curse on the Israelites. He offered the prophet a monetary reward for the service. Balaam consulted with God for the proposal. God told him not to go. But Balak would not give up. He sent more officials with a better offer. Balaam really liked the offer and he really wanted to go. Still he asked God who told him to go but speak only what was told. So Balaam set out to go with the Moabite officials. On the way, however, the angel of the Lord stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam's donkey saw the angel standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand. The donkey turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat the animal for that. This happened two more times. Surprisingly, his donkey spoke to him what it was doing. Finally the Lord opened Balaam's eyes to see what was going on. Balaam said to the angel, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back" (Nu 22:34). The angel told him to go with the Moabites but speak only what God told him. When he arrived in Moab, Balaam delivered seven messages, but did not put a curse on the Israelites, despite the repeated request by Balak. So it seemed that Balaam was an okay prophet. But the story did not there. Later on, Balaam returned to Balak and advised him how to entice the Israelites to put a curse on themselves. Numbers 25 explains how the Israelites began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to worship their own gods. The Lord's anger burned against them. He sent a plague that killed 24,000 Israelites. This is what Numbers 31:16 says about the incident: "They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord's people."

So what was Balaam's sin? Outwardly, he seemed to follow the word of God. But his heart was not in line with God. In the end, he followed his own desires. St. Peter says that Balaam son of Bezer "loved the wages of wickedness" (2Pe 2:15). In verse 14, Jesus

said that Balaam *taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.*

Look at verse 15 again. *Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* Some of the believers in Pergamum were also attracted to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. They were guilty of holding to the false teaching. So who were the Nicolaitans? We don't know for sure. Some Bible scholars believe that they were the followers of Nicolas who had been one of the seven deacons listed in Acts 6 but abandoned his faith to teach the Gnostic ideas. I heard that he had a very beautiful wife and encouraged his followers to sleep with her. These people abused the grace of Jesus by teaching people to use the freedom in Christ to indulge in sin with impunity. Their doctrine was the doctrine of compromise. Following the Gnostic ideas, they taught the separation of spirit and body. They not only taught that sexual immorality was okay but encouraged them to practice it. Jesus hated their practice. In his earlier letter to the believers in Ephesus, Jesus said, "You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Rev 2:6).

What was Jesus' stern warning against those who held the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans? Look at verse 16. *"Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."* They had to realize that the words of Christ are like double-edged sword. If they obeyed his words and follow his ways, they would be blessed by God. On the other hand, if they ignored his words, they would be disciplined by God.

How can we apply these words of Christ to us today? We may say that we don't have Balaam among us. We don't have Nicolaitans among us. Is that true? We may not have the groups so named among us, but we certainly have the same false teachings today. Many people subscribe to the ideas of *carpe diem* or YOLO—what St. Paul described as a philosophy of "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1Co 15:32). Sexual immorality is not considered serious by some people. Pleasure seeking is part of life to many people. Even believers are tempted to live an easygoing way of life. We must repent our compromising life and hear and obey the words of the Jesus, who says to us, "Repent therefore!"

Look at verse 17. *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.* The Lord gives us a promise. This is how the Lord loves us. Even as he rebukes our life of compromise, he gives us hope. He promises to give us two things if we are victorious in overcoming our temptations by hearing and holding on to his words. The first is the hidden manna. God gave his people manna as they traveled through the wilderness (Jn 6:49). Now Jesus promises to feed us with the bread from heaven. Only Jesus, the bread of life, can satisfy our deep, spiritual hunger. He also promises a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. This white stone may be the symbol of a "not guilty" verdict in the Roman court system and an admission ticket to the eternal kingdom of God. Also, in the Roman world, a winning athlete was given a white stone with his name written on it. Either way, Jesus promises

that he will give us the crown of life if we endure to the end and be victorious. This is a repeated promise of Jesus. Earlier, to the believers in Ephesus, Jesus promised, “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (2:7). To the believers in Smyrna, he said, “The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death” (2:11).

In today’s passage, we learned that Jesus wants us to remain true to his name, even as we go through persecutions and trials because of our faith in him. He urges us to repent our spiritual and moral compromises by turning to his words. He promises to give us the hidden manna and white stone with our name written on it. May the Holy Spirit help us to be victorious in our spiritual battle to the end!