



APOSTATE IN PERGAMUM: GOOD DEEDS, BAD DOCTRINE

Part 5 of The Seven

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Rev. 2:12–17 | May 20, 2012

Revelation 2:12–17

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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.’”

THE CITY OF PERGAMUM

I’ll pray and we’ll get to work. We’ll be in Revelation 2:12–17.

Father God, thank you for an opportunity for us to gather together here in Pergamum, as we hear the Lord Jesus’ words to the church at Pergamum a few thousand years ago. God, I pray in our time together, that the Bible would go from black and white to color for us. That we would see and understand a little more clearly exactly what it is that the Lord Jesus was trying to communicate. God, thank you as well that I have an opportunity to teach. And ask for your grace on us, and your Spirit in me, as we open the Scriptures to hear from Jesus, in whose name we pray, amen.

Well, this is the great city of Pergamum. And before we get into Revelation 2:12–17, a little bit about the city. As you can tell, it’s built on a great mountain. This is actually about one thousand feet up, which is a very high point for this region. And as we travel and tour this area you’ll hear the word acropolis.” Well, that simply means “high point” or “high place.” So this would have been the acropolis, the high place, for this region.

If you go back a few thousand years to the days of the New Testament, what had happened was Christianity started basically in and around Jerusalem. And there, the temple was destroyed in about 70 AD and people scattered. Christians scattered on mission. And then the locus of early Christianity spread to what is now modern-day Turkey. And inclusive of that was, as well, places like Ephesus, but Pergamum was one of those sending centers for missionary work as well. And so, this city was strategic and it was important.

In its day it was anywhere from 60,000 to 150,000 people. The population is debated and some of the census material isn’t that clear. But what we can surmise is this was a very affluent city. The amphitheater that we’re in was about ten thousand seats. And being the high point, you could see all over the valley. This made this the safe place to be. So there were fortified walls around this city. And it was such a safe place that Alexander the Great actually stored what was perhaps billions of dollars of gold, right here. Because in this fortified city it was very secure. You could see your enemies coming for miles. And you’re almost impenetrable, almost unable to be conquered by someone who would come to do you harm.

The way it would work is the most wealthy, affluent citizens lived here at the acropolis. They lived at the top of this mountain. They enjoyed the views and the safety that it provided. Most of the commoners, the peasants, they lived down the hill, they lived down in the villages, and they generally wouldn’t come up here except for significant events. So, in this place there would be plays and entertainment of various sorts and kinds.

Two noteworthy aspects here are the Temple of Zeus—there was an altar just around the corner—and at the high point here, at the top of the acropolis, was the emperor’s image, and he was worshiped as a god. And as well, just around to my left is the Temple of Dionysus, the goddess of wine. People would come here for drinking parties, brothels. They would come here for shows, for entertainment, for music.

Imagine it in its glory, some two thousand years ago. A magnificent city and this was a magnificent place. It was the center of lots of worship, so Zeus was worshiped here, the goddess Athena was worshiped here, as I said, Dionysus was worshiped here. This was the center of the worship of the Roman emperor for the region. So sacrifices would be made to these various gods and goddesses.

And in that day they were very polytheistic and pluralistic. You’d have lots of goddesses and gods that you would worship. And people would come here to the high place to do just that, as well as entertainment, prostitution. This was a bit of a party town. This was kind of the Vegas of the region, and people would come here to do things that they, quite frankly, shouldn’t.

Down the hill as well, was something called the Asclepius, which you'll see, that means "healing." And so it was basically one of the first, if we could use this language or nomenclature, spas in the history of the world. They had dream therapy there before Freud. They had an auditorium that would seat up to 3,500 people who would come in for lectures. They had sleep chambers underground. They used water therapy. Music for therapy. They had lots of alternative healing.

The symbol of that area was the serpent, which for us is very interesting biblically. And it was considered to be kind of like Lourdes in our day, where Catholics will go in an effort to be healed. And so, they also thought, in one particular spring, that it may have, in fact, even been the fountain of youth. That's what the people believed in the day.

So you would have very wealthy people living up here. And then you would have very hurting people come to the healing center, where they would seek to find alternative treatment. We have in the Seattle area the Bastyr University. That was basically the Bastyr of its day. Alternative medicine, a few thousand years ago, was centered right here in ancient Pergamum. And part of that was funded by the very affluent citizens who lived up in the fortified city of the high place. Gives you a little bit of understanding to the history of the city, as well.

JESUS IS PAYING ATTENTION

What happens then is in Revelation, Jesus speaks to this city, so we move from the ancient archeology to the Scriptures. And the story of Revelation begins in Revelation 1, where all of the disciples eventually died a brutal, martyr's death, with the exception of John.

John was Jesus' beloved disciple, we read in John's gospel. He was like a kid brother to Jesus. He really loved Jesus and Jesus really loved him. He was part of the inner circle of three disciples. Peter, James, and John were there with Jesus in very special moments of his life, and dear friends of his. And they were so close that even from the cross, as he was being crucified, Jesus appointed John to look after his mother, Mary. Well, that's usually your nearest and dearest friend.

And so what happened was they tried to murder, martyr John, but he didn't die. They actually boiled him alive in a vat of oil. And he didn't die. And so he was exiled to a place called Patmos. And you can read that in Revelation 1. And he was up, they presume, in a cave at the top of Patmos. And we went there, and took footage, and all of that we're glad to show you.

And in that place, it is reported that Jesus showed up. Now if you can imagine this for John, all the other disciples are dead, Christians are being murdered and martyred. It's the reign of the emperor, Domitian. He is a tyrant. He is formally persecuting Christians. John is away from his church on the Lord's day, a Sunday. And Jesus comes down from heaven to visit with John. It's this magnificent moment. This only happens a few times in the New Testament. It happens for Paul when Jesus comes down to be with him. And it happens for John, when likewise, Jesus comes down to be with him.

And then Jesus speaks to John, and he gives him seven letters to write. And those are the seven churches of Revelation, and they follow geographically out of the city of Ephesus. And so one of those cities was Pergamum, and he was speaking to the church at Pergamum. So if you've got a red-letter Bible, for example, where the words of Jesus are in red, all of this section of Revelation 2 and 3 will be in red.

So imagine if, whether it's Mars Hill, or whatever church you attend, Jesus wrote a letter to your church, and he did so decades after ascending back into heaven. And you've just been living your life, and doing your thing, and all of a sudden you realize Jesus is actually paying attention to our church. He knows what we're doing, what we're not doing, and he has an opinion about that. And he writes these letters to seven churches, and this is what he writes to the church at Pergamum, through the pen of John.

JESUS' WORDS TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM

So Revelation 2:12-17, "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write—" And you're going to hear a few things echoed in each of the seven letters. One is that each church has an angel. And this is that each church has physical leaders—elders, pastors, deacons, and the like. It also has spiritual leaders, angels that are appointed as ministers and messengers to represent God, to spiritually protect the church, to guard it against false teaching and demonic attack.

This is very important to recognize, that a church is filled with people, but ultimately it is governed by God. And what we're doing as the church of Jesus Christ is not just physical life together, but spiritual life together.

God appoints to the church an angel. So Mars Hill Church, I presume, has an angel. Whatever church you attend has an angel, has a spirit being, created by God, and commissioned with the express purpose of protecting, and leading, and serving your local church.

And so he says, "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast to my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you,'" and he says it again, "'where Satan dwells. 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. So also you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 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.'"

So Jesus is speaking to the church here at Pergamum. And what's interesting is we see that Jesus knows exactly what's going on. And you need to

know this today: Jesus knows exactly what every church is doing. In his risen, ascended, ruling, omnipotent position, he sees and knows everyone and everything. And the church doesn't belong to you, it doesn't belong to me, it doesn't belong to us, every local church ultimately belongs to Jesus. And he is paying careful attention to the faithfulness and the unfaithfulness in every church.

This is important because sometimes people, long-standing members, leaders, major donors, can think, "This is my church." And ultimately it's not. It all belongs to Jesus. We all belong to Jesus. And his estimation of our conduct and doctrine is exceedingly important.

And so they get this letter from Jesus, and it was interesting, as well, because one of the things that Pergamum was noted for is that it created, and perfected ultimately, an alternative method of parchment making and book writing. And so, there was at one point in this city a library of 200,000 volumes. It was one of the largest libraries in the world. That was until Mark Antony came, and he conquered the city, and he took all of those books and he gave them to his lover, Cleopatra. I don't know if she liked to read, but she got a 200,000-volume library from Mark Antony. And despite all of the books that were written, many of them, we do not know exactly where they went or what has happened to them, but this particular letter to the city has been preserved as sacred Scripture.

PERSECUTION

So it starts with Jesus giving certain encouragements. He says that they remain Christians despite suffering physically and spiritually. And he says that they have been persecuted. And in that day, you would be persecuted because there were more than fifty gods and goddesses worshiped in the area, and when you said, "No, there's only one God, his name is Jesus," you're going to get resistance from all those other spiritualities and religions.

Additionally, they were persecuted governmentally because there was an emperor in that day named Domitian. He was a violent, ungodly man. The people—he had some successes, to be fair—but the people really did not like him as a ruler. And his own wife plotted as part of his murder, to have him killed. And Domitian decided that he was god. And so what would normally happen is an emperor would rule and would be worshiped like a god from the high places, and then after they died it would be said that they went into the spirit world with the other gods, and they became a god. So emperors generally didn't declare themselves god. Others would declare them god after they died.

Well, Domitian decided, "I'll just declare myself god." So he ascribed to himself titles like lord, god, and savior. And you would have to offer sacrifices to him and worship him as god above any and every god. So you could worship whatever god or gods you wanted, but you had to worship the Roman emperor, and if you didn't you could be persecuted and put to death. And so for the Christians to say, "No, Lord, God, Savior, that's Jesus," that meant that they were at odds with the government.

The only exception to these laws were the Jews, who had an exception whereby they could worship their God freely, but as soon as Christians were essentially separated from Jews, they were no longer under legal protection. And there was widespread persecution, martyrdom, and murder of Christians.

So their suffering is very real. They have spiritual suffering, they have physical suffering, they're ostracized, they're rejected by those who are Jews in the synagogue. They're rejected by those who are in the government because they don't worship the emperor, and that's seen as being anti-nationalistic. Furthermore, they're also rejected by the other religions and spiritualities in the worship of Athena, and Dionysus, and Zeus, and the other gods and goddesses. So the Christians were very much persecuted.

Antipas

He speaks here as well of one particular martyr, it's one of the earliest non-disciple martyrs and murders outside of church history, and that is Antipas. That was probably not his birth name, instead it was probably his convert name as a Christian. And not Bible, but history tells us that he was put in a brass bowl and slow roasted. That's how they killed him. He was slow roasted in a brass bowl. That's how Antipas died, and he was a member of the church here at Pergamum. And so he was obviously loved by the people, and he served as a great testimony of faithfulness despite the cost of one's own life.

And so what's interesting, Jesus even knows that Antipas had suffered and ultimately been murdered and martyred, and so he mentions him by name. And in so doing, he's lifting up one man, saying, "Many of you are unfaithful, but there are some faithful people here like Antipas." And he's exalting here in an honorable way, Antipas as a leader for us all to follow.

And his name, curiously enough, means "one who suffers in the place of another." And so Antipas is kind of like Jesus; now, no one is exactly like Jesus, but Jesus died in our place for our sins, so he suffered in our place. And Antipas then suffered in the place of Christians, and that's exactly what his Christian name means.

Satan's Throne

He also tells them that not only have they suffered physically but also spiritually. And there's a lot to be said here. He says a few times, "This is where Satan has his throne." So this was a center of demonic activity. Like I told you, down the hill at the Asclepian, at the healing center, they had oracles who would interpret your dreams. These are basically shamans, these are people who are involved in the occult and the magic arts, and they're like astrologers and dream readers in our day. And people would come here because there was a collection of these demonically inspired leaders.

Furthermore, as I said, just around the corner there was, and you can now see the remains of it, the Altar of Zeus. And when he says, "You're suffering because you're in a place where Satan has his throne," it may have been that place. That sat eight hundred to one thousand feet up, overlooking the entire

valley of Pergamum. And so people could see it from a long distance. And it was a magnificent structure, and it was an altar, a worship place dedicated to the god Zeus.

Now what's curious about that is that it was ultimately captured by the Germans, and so it is no longer here, just the foundational remains are. And it's a highly debated position, but some archeologists say that Adolf Hitler actually—and this is a bit of Indiana Jones for you—that Adolf Hitler actually took the captured Altar of Zeus and had an architect draw a rendering with the specifications to build his own personal pulpit based upon the Altar of Zeus. And Adolf Hitler himself preached from that same place. Lots of demonic activity throughout history from this place.

So the question is, well, where is Satan's throne? Is it Zeus's altar, or is it the image of the emperor? Is it the image of the emperor on top of the hill, where people would have to worship him as god? Either way, the point is, that here worship was very fervent, but it wasn't to the God of the Bible. And people would travel for miles for spiritual healing, and consultation, and alcohol, and prostitution, but there wasn't a deep love for Jesus.

So Jesus says to the church, basically, "I know you're in a very difficult place. I know that you're being opposed politically and spiritually. That you're suffering. That at least one member of your church has been martyred and murdered."

JESUS REBUKES THEIR BELIEF AND BEHAVIOR

And he goes on to say, as well, though, that he is displeased with them, and that there are some corrections and rebukes for the people. And this is important to us because, practically friends, if our life is hard, or we're struggling, or suffering, or being a Christian has cost us a job, or a relationship, or a family member, or in some way there has been a painful consequence for us, we can think that we have permission to sin against God and rebel a little bit.

And Jesus says, "No." Jesus says, "I acknowledge, and I understand, and I see your city and the complex variables in which you live and minister. Nonetheless, it doesn't excuse rebellion and sin." And so then he comes along to rebuke and correct them, and he does so on belief, and then secondarily on behavior.

And on belief he says, "Here's the problem: there's a spirit of Balaam in the city." Balaam was an Old Testament false prophet, and he encouraged false doctrine and sexual sin. And he said there were people in the city—and this is true in every city sadly—there are people who claim to belong to God, and they claim to speak for God, but they teach things that are contrary to the Bible, and oftentimes that results in sexual immorality.

Almost every cult I have studied in the history of the world, almost every alternative spirituality and religion, includes sexual sin being permitted by the religious leaders. It's almost invariable. That's why even high places like this would have temples with prostitutes that people would come to and their sexual sin would be part of their spiritual worship.

And so what he's saying is, it's like the days of Balaam in the Old Testament, where there are false teachers encouraging sexual sin, but the church doesn't really mind that much. It's like in our own day when certain denominations are saying heterosexual marriage is optional, there are other lifestyles, there are other sexualities, there are other orientations that are perfectly acceptable in the sight of God. That same thing was happening here in Pergamum, and Jesus says, "It's demonic, it's satanic, it's false and it's wrong, even though it might be tolerant and diverse."

He then also critiques their behavior, and that is a lot of sexual sin. This would include fornication (people living and sleeping together before marriage), adultery (where people are unfaithful to their covenant vows), and people participating in the sexual sin of the city. And Jesus says, "That's unacceptable for my people. That's unacceptable in the sight of God." And so he rebukes them for that.

APOSTATE

He's basically saying that they are apostate. And so the big word for the church at Pergamum is that they were apostate, and that is that they would profess faith that they do not practice. Someone who is apostate says, "Yes, I'm a Christian," but they live contrary to the teachings of the Bible. And that's exactly what was happening here.

And this happens in our day, when somebody's baptized as a kid, and they don't walk with Jesus as an adult. They say, "Well, I'm a Christian." The question is, well, are you?

This is also what happens when someone is walking with Jesus as a Christian, and then they stop. They start sinning, going into false doctrine, false teaching, they fall astray. And what oftentimes happens then is people ask the question, "Well, were they a Christian or not?" And ultimately Jesus is the one who makes that call.

But such people who are apostate, they know exactly what they're doing, and they're living in open rebellion. This can be doctrinally, where they find parts of the Bible that they don't like, and so they reject those teachings. And usually under that there's a moral cause, often sexual. And that's exactly where Romans 1 goes, it says, "They suppress the truth in unrighteousness because they want to sin." And then Romans 1 goes on to say, "And a lot of their sin is sexual sin."

So you need to know this, even though this letter is two thousand years old, the human heart is the same. Sometimes it's not that we don't know the truth, it's that we don't like it. And sometimes it's not that we don't understand the Bible, but we want to do something different.

And the people at Pergamum had decided, "There is a way for us to say, 'I'm a Christian, but I'm going to believe what I want to believe and behave how I want to behave.'" And Jesus says, "I see and know all, and the answer's no. The answer's no." And apostasy is something that is really tragic.

One of the most, I was thinking about this, one of the most painful stories of apostasy that I know of, and I won't divulge his name or too many details, but it was a man who I'd known for years and loved very much. And he had interned at a church, a very good church, he had taught the Bible in Sunday school classes. He'd actually preached in a few churches. He married a very, very godly woman.

And then years into the marriage he just told her, "I want a divorce. I refuse to go to church. I just want to be with other women. And I want to do whatever I want to do." And I remember meeting with him on multiple occasions and saying, "But do you know what the Bible says?" And he could quote verses all day. "Well, do you know who Jesus is?" He knew exactly who Jesus was.

And so I asked him, I said, "Well, what are you going to do?" He said, "I'm going to rebel. I'm going to sin. I'm going to divorce my wife. I'm going to stop going to church. And I'm going to go chase women and do what I want." And so I prayed for him and I talked with him, but that's exactly what he did.

Now if you asked him today, "Are you a Christian?" he probably would say, "Yes." And if you ask him to quote Bible verses, he could quote a lot. If you try to debate theology with him, he might even win. But there's not a real love for God. And he's living as an apostate. Whether or not he's a Christian, I don't know, I don't make those decisions, Jesus does.

But that's exactly what was happening in the city of Pergamum. Lots of apostasy and leaders who were teaching false doctrine and they were encouraging sexual sin. And a lot of people were saying, "We like their version of Christianity because it doesn't command us to repent. It tolerates our lifestyle, not only does it tolerate our lifestyle, it affirms our lifestyle. So we don't exist to glorify God, God exists to give permission to us to do whatever we want." And Jesus says, "That's unacceptable."

HOW COULD WE FALL INTO THE SAME TRAP?

And so, a couple things for us that I wrote down. How could we fall into the same trap? And it's interesting as we sit here, there is no church in Pergamum. There's no church here. There are no Christians in this entire region. Today in the nation of Turkey there are some 74 million people. And when you read about the New Testament, much of it is to, or from, or about what is now modern-day Turkey. Today there are some 74 million people in Turkey. There are about 3,500 evangelical Christians. Out of 74 million people, 3,500 Christians in Turkey. According to Operation World, which has some of the best statistics you can find on unreached people groups, that makes Turkey the most unreached nation on the earth.

But there was a day when this was the center of Christianity. Pergamum was a city that had an opportunity to plant churches and to be used of God for a long time, but today that's not the case in Pergamum. So at some point, the apostasy won, and the gospel, I won't say lost, but ceased to be believed in and behaved by. And how could we fall into that same position?

Couple things, number one, is your identity formed more by Christ or culture? See, for the Pergamites, they wanted their identity to be shaped primarily by culture. Sexual sin, religious pluralism, general spirituality that was ultimately demonism. And if you decide, "Who I am, what I believe, how I behave is going to be more shaped by culture than Christ," you invariably put yourself on a path of apostasy. You just do.

Number two, are you compromising sexually? See, sex is an act of worship. It's not just a physical thing, it's also a spiritual thing. That's why, for example, Romans 12 says, "To offer your bodies as living sacrifices." That's an act of worship. If you're compromising spiritually, you may confess Christ is Lord, but you are collaborating with your enemy because in sexual sin that's one of the ways that we practice apostasy. That's one of the ways that we turn from God and go each our own way. And so if you're living together, sleeping together, looking at things, doing things that you ought not be doing, you're on the path to apostasy like the Pergamites.

Number three, are you compromising doctrinally? For the Pergamites, they said, "Yes, we believe in Jesus, but there are some things that the Bible says that are very controversial and unpopular. We're going to reject those things, find teachers who will affirm what we want to hear, pay them well, so that we can live in rebellion with spiritual authority permitting it."

Friends, the truth is, much of the Bible when we first read it, we don't like it, 'cause it says we're wrong. And we have to change our mind, and we have to change our behavior. And that word "repent" that Jesus uses here in Revelation 2, it talks about a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of direction, a change of behavior, and a change of life. And so, I would ask you, are there any places in the Bible where you are suppressing the truth, where you're rejecting the truth? If so, you're on the path to apostasy.

And then, number four, I just simply ask you, are you apostate? Are you someone who professes a faith that you're not practicing? And this will affect your life. You may or may not be a Christian, I don't know, Jesus knows your heart. You can always turn and come back to him. That's what he invites them to do. That's what he invites us all to do. It affects your children and your children's children.

And you see that here in Pergamum. Again, back to my big idea. Just look from this high place. You don't see any Christians. You don't see any Christians, because at some point apostasy became the majority. And this can happen in your church. This can happen in your family. This can happen in my church. This can happen in my family. We're always a generation or two from the end of the forward progress of the gospel. And it's apostasy biblically, behavior, and belief that really sets us on that course.

REPENT

So what does Jesus say? He gives a few commands. Number one, he says to repent. And this is to change your mind. Repentance begins in the mind. You say, "You know what, what I've been thinking is wrong, what I've been excusing is inexcusable. The fight I've had against God mentally or

academically, I need to just stop fighting and I need to start trusting.” So Jesus invites repentance.

And for some of us this can be very hard because it’s an acknowledgement that we’re wrong. But I tell you what, repentance is a great gift that God gives. It’s an opportunity to stop doing wrong, to start doing right. To stop believing wrong and start believing right. To stop walking away from Jesus and start walking with him. So it’s a great gift that God gives the Christian. And it requires a little bit of humility ‘cause it starts with, “I’m wrong, you’re right, I’ll submit.” That’s the essence of repentance.

He goes on to say as well, number two, “If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.” Jesus says, “I don’t tolerate rebellion and apostasy forever, there will be consequences.” And in that day the emperor had the rule of the sword. He could take life at any point. He could judge.

Jesus says he is going to come with a sword and he’s going to war against them with the sword of his mouth, which is probably a reference to the Scriptures. In Ephesians 6 and Hebrews 4 it says that the Word of God is living and active, sharp as a doubled-edged sword, penetrating to the joints and marrow. And so we’re in this cosmic battle against Satan and demons. They work through false religion, false teaching, false doctrine, sexual sin, and Jesus says, “The weapon that I have chosen to do battle against error, apostasy, and heresy, is the sword, it’s the Scriptures, it’s the truth of the Word of God.”

And so the key to avoiding apostasy is always coming back to the Word of God, and hearing what God would say through the Scriptures, and he likens it here to a sword for battle. And so you and I need to know, when we hear a lie, we need to take it to the Scripture for the truth. When we’re tempted to sin, we need to go to the Bible for instruction. When we’ve said or done something wrong, we go to the Bible for correction. It’s the weapon by which God gives us spiritual victory.

He goes on as well and he says that he’ll give them some of the hidden manna, that’s number three. And in the days of the Israelites, you know the story is they were wandering in the wilderness, God sustained them, and he sustained them through the provision of manna, which is a form of bread. And what’s he’s saying is, “If you will trust me, if you will walk with me, if you’ll be faithful to me, I will take care of you. I’ll find a way to feed you. I’ll find a way to look after you.”

And oftentimes, when you’re in a culture that’s anti-Christian, that’s the fear. “I’m going to lose my job. I’m going to lose my security. I’m going to lose my possessions. What will happen to me?” And Jesus says, “I know exactly what’s happening.” And I hope you find this as an encouragement. And Jesus says, “I’ll find a way to put bread on the table. Trust me and I’ll take care of you.”

He goes on, number four, to say that he will—number four is, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” As you read the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, this is yet again a common refrain that comes up, where Jesus keeps saying over and over and over, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church.”

So, what he’s saying is one of the ways we become apostate with our behavior and with our belief is we stop listening to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God. He wrote the Bible through human authors. So one of the ways we keep our ear open to the Holy Spirit is to be in the Scriptures and allow the Scriptures to be in us. Another way is through prayer, and listening, and talking to God, to be filled with the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit as Jesus was.

And so, this is a relationship with the Holy Spirit, who, he is God, and he takes up residence in us, and he leads and guides and instructs the Christian just as he did the Lord Jesus. Jesus was baptized by the Spirit. We read in the Gospel of Luke that he was filled with the Holy Spirit, that he was led by the Holy Spirit, that he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. And so, what he is saying here is: to walk with Jesus is to walk like Jesus, and that is to walk by the power of the Holy Spirit, and to keep our ear open to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us and to our church.

A NEW NAME AND A WHITE STONE

He goes on, as well, to say that then he will give them a white stone, and he’s going to give them a new name. And so these are very important, where he says, “I’ll give you a new name,” what would happen in the Bible is oftentimes when somebody converted, they would get a new name. So Abram became Abraham. Cephas became Peter. Saul became Paul.

And what would happen is to become a Christian was like a rebirth, it was like being born again. This is connected to something called the doctrine of regeneration, and that is not only does Jesus die and rise to forgive our sin, but to make us different, new people. So you’re not just a forgiven version of yourself, you’re a forgiven and changed version of yourself.

What this means is that your identity is altogether different. You’re no longer defined by what you’ve done or what’s been done to you, you’re defined by what Jesus has done for you. You’re clean, you’re loved, you’re forgiven, you’re made new. Your old nature goes away. Your new nature comes in. The Holy Spirit empowers you. And here’s what happens: you start to get a new mind, you think differently. You also start to get new desires. You want to read the Bible. You want to meet with God’s people. You want to stop sinning. You want to start learning. You want to start growing. And your desires change.

Now, how many of you experienced this as new Christians? All of a sudden you’re like, “I never wanted to read the Bible, and I like reading it. I didn’t want to hang out with Christians, and now I’m looking for them. I didn’t want to go to church, and now I’m sitting in one, and I’m singing. All of a sudden what I used to do, I’m ashamed of. And things I used to make fun of, that’s what I’m doing.” You’ve been born again. You’ve become a new person. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence in you.

And to show that marked, cataclysmic, massive, tectonic shift in your soul, God gives you a new name, 'cause you're just a different person. And so the way it worked in this day was oftentimes when people became Christians, they would get a brand-new name. They would get a brand-new name. A Christian name. And Jesus says, "I'll give some of you, if you'll walk with me, I'll give you a new name."

And then he goes on to say as well that he'll give them a white stone. Now, there's a bit of a debate here as to what this means. Sometimes the wealthy would give away tickets to events here at this theater and stadium, and so they'd give you essentially a white stone, and that was your entrance ticket. Some say this could be referencing heaven. That if you belong to Jesus you're going to get your first-class ticket to the kingdom of God.

Some would say, as well, that when you would stand before a judge or a magistrate, and you were up for a criminal behavior and they were going to render a verdict, there would be a black stone and white stone. And if it was a white stone you were declared innocent, and if it was a black stone you were declared guilty. And this may be a reference to because of the death of Jesus, our sin has been atoned for and we're seen as righteous, as justified in the sight of God, and as a result we're not punished, we're given freedom.

Another perspective is that, as you walk around and you examine this place, you're going to see a lot of white stones, they're kind of everywhere littering. And one tradition holds that when there had been perhaps even conflict between two families, the two patriarchs, the men would come together, representing their tribe, their kin, their clan, their people. And they would form a truce and they would form a covenant, and they would essentially say, "We are now going to commit to do life together as people. We're going to love one another, we're going to serve one another, we're going to take care of one another, and we're going to look out for one another."

And then those two patriarchs, representing their people, would take a stone, they'd take a white stone, and it would be broken into two parts, and then each family was given half of the stone. So that in the future when their children, their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren grew up together, intermarried, entered into business together, whatever it might be, if a conflict should arise, the family would come back together and the patriarchs in that day would put the two stones together and say, "This is how our fathers wanted us to live. They wanted us to live together in unity, as one." And so each head of the family, as the patriarch, would be given this half of the stone from generation to generation.

And he could be saying here that this is what God does with us. Though we're sinners and rebels and guilty, God comes to us in Jesus Christ and says, "I'll make a covenant with you. You'll be my people, I'll be your God. I'm going to love, bless, care for you forever. And I'm asking you to trust me and to walk with me. You keep your half of the covenant, I'll keep my half of the covenant. And if so, it'll go good for your life, for your eternal life, for your children, for your children's children." And that may be exactly what Jesus is referencing here in Revelation 2, to the church at Pergamum.

A BIGGER PICTURE OF JESUS

And so in closing, the real issue here is how you see Jesus. And here we see Jesus as exalted, no longer a humble, Galilean peasant, but resurrected from death, ascended into heaven. We see him ruling and reigning as God. We see him as omniscient, all knowing. He knows everything that's going on at the church at Pergamum. He knows the false teachers, the sexual sin. He knows who's doing and teaching what they ought not be doing. He sees Antipas being cooked alive in a brass bowl, and suffering. He sees the Altar of Zeus. He sees the image of the emperor. He sees the temple of Dionysus. He sees exactly what's going on. And that he's presented as a warrior king, who comes with the sword of the Word of God, to bring justice, conviction of sin, and new life.

And so friends if you're struggling with apostasy or you know or love someone who is, the big idea is this: they need to have a bigger picture of Jesus. Not just a humble, marginalized, Galilean peasant that had some insightful things to say, but the crucified, risen, Lord, God, Savior, not Domitian, it's Jesus, who rules and reigns over all peoples, times, places, and churches.

And the sad story of Pergamum, in closing, is that at some point the apostasy won. And so I would even encourage us as we're here to be praying for this region. There is not one church in Pergamum, just a legacy of apostasy. And the great myth is that it can't happen to us, it can't happen to our family, and it can't happen to our church. And the story of Pergamum is, if everybody doesn't stick close to Jesus, anything is possible, anything is possible.

Father God, thank you for an opportunity to study Jesus' words to the church at Pergamum from right here in Pergamum. God, it's a sober moment. God, as we take in the landscape we are altogether awed that the news of a Galilean peasant would come to this land, would come up this mountain, that a church would be planted here, that worshipers of Jesus had gathered here. And God, our hearts are broken that there was apostasy. Our hearts are broken that today there is no church here. There are no Christians. And so God, I thank you that we get to be here, and we get to remember who Jesus is, and rejoice in what he's done. And pray as well, God, for the great city of Pergamum and the surrounding region. We pray, Lord God, that a church would be planted here, and that churches would be planted here. And that, Lord God, the legacy of apostasy would be replaced with a legacy of ministry. And so we pray for you to rise up your servants in this place, in Jesus' good name, amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.