

Imagine that you discovered your house is the target of a network of thieves. So you get ready to stand up to them: you set up a security system, you post a guard day and night at the front door, and you stand on guard against the threat!

Then one night you hear a soft knock at the back door. You open the door suspiciously but to your relief there's no thief, just a very kind and pleasant woman who happens also to be beautiful and charming. You and your wife invite her in and she's come as a friend to share some of her *Turkish Delight* with you. It is so good! You eat more and more, but it also happens to induce sleep. You both fall asleep and the kind thief robs you blind and runs off with all your jewels and valuables!

On one side you were standing strong against the threat, while at the back door you let yourself get tricked into allowing a thief in to steal all your stuff! That's what was happening at the church of Pergamum: at the front door they were being very faithful to take their stand for the Gospel, while they let the enemy come in at the back door to seduce and, if he got his way, destroy them.

Jesus walks among His churches. His blazing eyes see what's going on. (1:14) He warns them against eating the Turkish delight before it's too late.

### **"Watch the Back Door!": How a Faithful Church allowed Error to Sneak In**

1. *Jesus praises them for their steadfast conviction*
2. *Jesus warns them against silent seduction*
3. *Jesus promises them perfect salvation*

#### **1. Jesus praises them for their steadfast conviction**

<sup>12</sup> **"And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword..."**

Doesn't that look like a rather imposing, scary, even nasty picture? Is Jesus, "the friend of sinners" (Matthew 11:19), really like that? Is Jesus really walking around our church here with a sharp, 2-edged sword coming out of His mouth? Yes, figuratively speaking (Revelation is a vision – the truth of God is told in symbolic pictures), that is who He is and what He is like. Maybe you say, "I never thought of Jesus that way!" That's why we study the Bible: to keep sharpening our view of Jesus, and to get a better view of Him.

Imagine you have are laying on the operating table at the hospital with a tumour that needs to be removed. Suddenly, you see a doctor coming toward you with a knife. Is he nasty? Is he mean? No! He's good! *Very good!* He cuts out the tumour to heal that person. And we say: that's just what was needed – a good doctor with a sharp knife. That's what Pergamum needed – a loving Saviour and Good Shepherd with a doubled-edged sword to perform surgery on that good church in Pergamum which needed Him to remove a tumour from their church. That's just the kind of Lord and Saviour all churches need. He walking among all His churches – here too.

<sup>13</sup> **"I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.**

Jesus knows where the church at Pergamum lives. He knows that city of the Roman empire, and the special challenges of living as a Christian and being a Church in that city! Jesus always has very specific knowledge of where a specific church is located and what problems it faces. Satan is, of course, the mastermind behind the persecution they're facing in the city. Just like the church in Smyrna: **the devil will put some of you in prison to test you.** (2.10) Notice what Jesus does not say: Satan lives in Pergamum – you should get out of there! No, the church is called to live and worship and witness in Satan's territory and push back against his kingdom with Jesus' Gospel! This is where Jesus put you. This is where he calls you to stand firm. *Be faithful right here where Satan dwells.*

**And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.** Like Smyrna, the church was under heavy pressure to compromise with false religions and with the worship of the emperor.

- If you were an athlete you were expected to join the idol-feast celebrations of the Olympic gods.
- If you were in the trades like carpentry or bricklaying or blacksmithing you were expected to go to the temples to join the pagan feasts.
- The same was true if you were involved in the medical profession. The cult of *Asclepius*, the serpent god of healing, was strong in Pergamum.

Those pagan feasts which athletes, doctors and tradesmen attended were more than just nice steak dinners. It involved prayers to the gods, offering incense to them, eating meat that had been sacrificed to the gods, visiting cult prostitutes - all to seek the favors of the gods on your life.

Then there was always the additional thing of offering incense to the emperor every morning and confessing "Caesar is Lord" as part of the obligation of living under Roman rule.

That's what it means to live where Satan's throne is and where Satan dwells. (It is possible that John refers here to a giant altar of Zeus built on a hill overlooking Pergamum, looking like a throne that governed the city.) If you refuse compromise in such a city you will get into trouble with your neighbors and with the local rulers quickly. *Light and darkness cannot live together in peaceful harmony. If you live godly in Christ Jesus you will suffer persecution.*

This is what happened to a man named "**Antipas, My faithful martyr,**" a member of the congregation. Was he an *athlete* that refused to go along with the worship of the sports god? A *doctor* that would not swear an oath to the serpent god Asclepius? A *bricklayer* who would not visit the cult prostitute to help the union prosper? We don't know, but he stayed true to Christ's Name. He did not compromise by reasoning, *You know I can believe in Jesus and say "Caesar is Lord" because that's just the way life works here; it is what it is.*

Many do that: they hold to the religion of the right hand and the left hand. Rather than worship Jesus alone and hang onto Him with both hands, they hang onto Jesus with their right hand but then hold onto an idol with their left hand because they don't want to lose a customer or a friend or their job or their place on the team. What about you? Are you being faithful to Christ? Or are you compromising your faith in Him in order to hang on to your favorite things in this world?

Antipas was faithful to Christ. He did not compromise. The church followed His example: they refused to bow to the gods.

Jesus calls us here to be faithful and not deny His name in anything, to be true to Him always. Don't let anyone pressure you into doing what displeases Him. Politely say what Joseph said to Potiphar's wife: ***How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?*** (Genesis 39:9) and then be willing to suffer the consequences for His name.

## **2. Jesus warns them against silent seduction**

<sup>14</sup> **But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.** <sup>15</sup> **Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans,<sup>1</sup> which thing I hate.**

While the guarding the *front* door carefully against compromise with some idols, they let other idols sneak in through the *back* door and live right in the church with them.

Remember how Balak king of Moab called on Balaam the prophet to curse Israel? (see Numbers 22-24) 7 times Balak tried to attack Israel at the front door and put a curse on Israel, but 7 times God protected Israel from Moab and brought blessings on Israel instead. But then sin sneaked in through Israel's back door. Balaam invited Balak to send Moabite women into Israel's camp and seduce the Israelite men into sexual immorality and idol worship. And Israel fell for it. The attempt to *persecute* them failed, but the attempt to *seduce* them succeeded. Balaam lured them into even worse defeat than Moab could have inflicted through the front door.

That's Jesus' challenge to the church: you've been faithful in standing up for my name and being my witness in persecution and have not let me down – where Ephesus lost their first love, you kept it! You loved me against those who wanted you to bow down to false gods. You put me first in your life. **But I have a few things against you:** unlike the church at Ephesus that kept out false teaching, you've allowed the **Balaamites** and the **Nicolaitans** to make a nest in your church and promote their false teachings among you. You kept the enemy out at the front door but you let the heretics in at the back door. You have not disciplined them for their errors, but have allowed their teachings a place in your congregation.

How easy it is to zero in on one set of sins and fight them, but ignore another set of sins and invite them.

What was the false teaching of the **Balaamites** and the **Nicolaitans**? We believe they were one and the same thing. It is hard 19 centuries later to know exactly what they taught, but at the heart of it was "worldly Christianity." A Christian could honor Christ and

follow the demands of the culture at the same time. He could say “Yes” to both. They could mix the religions of Rome with the religion of the Bible and just all get along, just like Balaam tried to mix Moabite and Israelite religion and lifestyle. Pergamum had people in the congregation who are encouraging them to join in pagan feasts offered to idols and to commit sexual immorality. And the church allowed it! They didn’t see it as a serious matter, or even thought it was good.

It’s like the evangelical churches in North America in the 1970s and 1980s which fought “the Battle for the Bible” and valiantly defended the Bible’s inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy, while at the same time celebrated “the power of positive thinking” and the lie of self-esteem. Or like churches that are vigorous in upholding the Reformed confessions but turn a blind eye toward and freely enjoy immoral movies and illicit sexual relationships between boyfriends and girlfriends.

This is very much the war in our own culture. The world says to the church: *You must learn to mix your beliefs with ours so we can all get along. You need to learn to embrace the things that are important to our culture so we can coexist peacefully as one big happy family.* Then many people in the church begin to be embarrassed and ashamed at just how radically different we are from the world, and begin to push a model of conformity: *How can we ever reach out if we don’t become like the world?*

So much of the church has begun to accept the moral agenda of our culture: the culture says that men & women are the same, so we should no longer teach the headship of man in the home and the church and the submission of women to their husbands. The culture says that you don’t have to be married to be in a sexual relationship, so we should lower our requirements to say that *as long as two people love each other anything’s okay.* The culture says it’s okay for men to marry men and women to marry women because that’s the way some people are made, and so many believe that the church has to accept this teaching even though the Bible rejects it, otherwise the church will become irrelevant in our culture. *It’s a new day and new days require new ways!*

So we stand up for Jesus at the front door and say we’re all about being true to His Name, and then allow compromise with the world in at the back door which goes against what Jesus teaches. We want to have it both ways. Jesus and the world. Let’s just all get along. How much pressure, especially when the battle between the church and the world gets heavier, to mix Israel and Moab so we can live easily and comfortably in this world and avoid embarrassment, poverty and suffering.

But Jesus is all about being faithful to God and to His Word. How can we be relevant in this world if we’re not radically different? How can we be salt and light if the salt loses its flavour and the light is hidden under a bushel?

<sup>16</sup> **Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.**

Jesus calls the church at Pergamum to repent of its compromise with this false teaching, for allowing such a teaching to have a place in the church. You must see your sin of tolerating this heresy of compromise, confess it, lovingly discipline it out of the church, like a surgeon cuts out a tumour. Jesus says to us: *If you don’t practice discipline I will.* He says: **I will come to you quickly and will fight them with the sword of my mouth.** Because I love you and want to see you thrive as a church, and continue to live like my faithful servant Antipas, to see you **be faithful until death.** (2:10)

We don’t know exactly what Christ had in mind but He would bring some trouble on that church to discipline and purify her.

Dear Church, let us be faithful to Christ on all fronts. Let us hold fast to our profession of faith when persecution comes, but let us also not allow tolerant attitudes toward our culture’s views enter through the back door. Let us be faithful to Christ through and through. Because we love Him. And because we love our world and want to be a true and faithful witness, not a compromised one.

### **3) Jesus promises them perfect salvation**

<sup>17</sup> **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.”**

“Those who have an ear” are those who are convicted by the message of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. They hear Him speaking to them. They confess their sins to Him. They ask for forgiveness. They want to be instructed and corrected in the truth. They give up their wrong ideas and sinful practices because they are Jesus’ disciples. They know that to have Jesus and lose your life or possessions or job or trophy, is far more important than to hang on to the world and lose your soul.

Jesus really is worth all the world – and more – to the believer. When we remember that He suffered, died on the cross, and rose again to take away our sin and judgment and to bring us to God so that we might live forever with God in the new creation, then we realize that being faithful to Him is always the most important issue every day, in every endeavour, and in every choice we make.

Remember Jesus as He's described in Revelation 1:5-6- **...Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.**

Jesus promises two wonderful gifts to those who remain faithful to Him and do not allow false teachings to tear down their faith:

1) **the hidden manna** – a jar of manna was kept in the holy of holies. If you stay true to Jesus who died and rose for your salvation, He is going to take you into the holy of holies in heaven and celebrate the heavenly banquet with you for all eternity!

2) **a white stone** – in those days, judges in a court of law gave you a white stone if you were acquitted, and a black stone if you were guilty. **I will give him a white stone** – and the new name written on it will be **the name of the Father and the Lamb:**

**Then I looked and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000, having His name and His Father's name written on their foreheads.** (Revelation 14:1)

That means that you will live forever in fellowship with the Triune God. In baptism He gives you Himself as your God and Saviour, and then when you trust in Him in life and in death as your Saviour and commit your life to Him, that promise will become fully-experienced reality in heaven:

**And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."**  
(Revelation 21:3-4)

Paul says in Romans 8:18: **I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed in us.** We will know that by experience in that final day when Jesus takes us to our eternal home: what we "lost" here on earth for Jesus sake will be nothing compared to the infinite joy and glory we gain when we hold fast to Jesus' name and do not deny Jesus' faith. (2:13)