



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Revelation 2:12-17

“Compromising Christians”

Revelation

TRANSCRIPT

We are continuing our studies in the book of Revelation, and we're in chapter 2. We're going to look at verses 12 through 17.

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

‘I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality.

So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make 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 him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.’”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let's bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for this time together on this Lord’s day. What a great blessing it is. We began this study in the book of Revelation some weeks ago, and John tells us there in the first chapter that he was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and you appeared before him. The Son appeared before him, the Lord Jesus Christ in all of his glory.

And then we go on in our studies, and we read the first verse of the second chapter, that he walks among the seven golden lampstands. And that means that our glorified Savior is walking among us as well; he’s here this morning. He’s with us. We need to know that, and realize that this is not just some meeting that we attend on any day of the week. This is the Lord’s day.

This is the day that you have set aside for your people to gather and worship and study, and the Lord is walking among us. He’s with us. Help us to sense his presence, and to know the seriousness of this moment together, the solemnness of it. And by your grace, through the ministry of the Spirit, may our minds be emptied of all the details of life, and all of the concerns of life.

Help us to focus our attention upon this text of Scripture and be taught of you. What a blessing it is to know that while you’ve given us human teachers, and we’re thankful for them, the ultimate teacher that each one of us possess as believers in Jesus Christ is the third person of the trinity; the Holy Spirit, who’s the seal upon our heart, which means he gives us eternal protection, and he’s our guide.

Our guide through life, our guide through the Scriptures; he’s the one that illuminates the Word of God and gives us understanding. He opens our hearts to receive it. And we pray for that ministry this morning – that it will go unhindered, and that our hearts would be yielded to his ministry, and we would learn the things that you’d have us to know from this letter to the church in Pergamum.

So bless us and build us up in the faith. Bless us spiritually, and bless us materially. Bless us with the physical things of life that we need. You made us physical beings, and we survive on material things of life. Our daily bread we must look to you for that, and we pray that you’d provide it. We pray that for all of us, because even when we’re in moments of prosperity, it’s all of you.

Yet there’s the danger in those times of forgetting you. Help us not to do that. And for those that are suffering affliction, who are without employment, or who are struggling in their jobs, we pray that you’d give them encouragement and blessing,

and open doors of opportunity for work. Help them to know that you’re in control. We’re reminded of that all through this great book of the Revelation. You are the sovereign God.

Not men. They make decisions that affect our lives, but ultimately, you’re the one that’s directing things, so encouragement them with that. Father, we have a number of people who have been laid low with physical affliction that’s very serious. We pray for them. Pray that you would give encouragement in the midst of very difficult times, and that you would give healing mercy.

We are so thankful that we, as believers in Jesus Christ, have direct access to the throne of grace. These aren’t mere words that we speak; we have genuine communication with you, genuine fellowship. We know that by faith because your Word promises that, so in the book of Hebrews we’re told to boldly approach the throne of grace, and we do that for everyone here, and for all those who have sought our prayers. Bless them.

Bless us now, Lord, as we turn to your Word. We pray that as we do so our hearts would be prepared; that we would approach this text with a desire to learn, and with worshipful hearts, and that you would lift our hearts in the moments of worship. So bless us now, we pray, in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] One of the hard decisions in life that we often have to make is when and when not to compromise. Sometimes we have to meet people halfway for a relationship to continue. Compromise is the grease that keeps the gears of government going. In fact, politics is the art of compromise, we’re told, and that may be true in politics. But it is not true in the church or in the Christian life.

Our motto must be, “No compromise.” Conviction must guide us in matters of faith and practice. And yet it is very easy to make compromises – small compromises to accommodate error in order to keep peace and avoid confrontation. Now, of course, there must be cooperation in churches, as in every relationship, and we have to be willing to accommodate one another in matters of non-essentials.

And there are many of those in the church, and so oftentimes people who can’t do that end up splitting with one another. Churches can divide over the most petty issues, and we need to be mature about that. Richard Baxter, the old Puritan preacher, used to say, “In fundamentals, unity; in non-fundamentals, liberty; in all things, charity.” That’s good counsel. But Christians can never compromise with sin.

There’s no cooperation there. There can be no unity there. No, that is where we are often tempted to yield. The church of Pergamum is an example of that; it was a good church, and in some ways, a model to us of faithfulness. But the church was tolerating sin, so the Lord now addresses that problem in the third letter to the seven churches, and he tells the Christians there to stop tolerating error, or he was coming with his sword and he would make war on them.

But those who overcome would be blessed, and blessed greatly. The postman who was delivering these seven letters has traveled across the sea from the island of Patmos to the city of Ephesus, on the western coast of Asia Minor. From Ephesus, he went 35 miles north to Smyrna. Now he continues along the coast another 40 miles before turning 10 miles inland from the Aegean Sea to Pergamum.

Not an important city commercially, but it was important politically. Someone said, “If Ephesus was the New York of Asia, Pergamum was its Washington.” It was the official capital of the province of Asia, and it was an impressive city to see. Pergamum was an acropolis; it was a city built on a cone-shaped mountain, about a thousand feet high, that dominated the valley below.

It had one of the great libraries of the ancient world, with over 200,000 parchment scrolls. So it was the seat of government, it was a center of culture, and a home to the gods. One of the most spectacular features of the city was the temples built on the upper part of the citadel. Most impressive was a huge altar to Zeus that stood near the top of the mountain. Around it was depicted the gods of Greece in victorious combat over the giants of the earth, symbolizing the triumph of civilization over barbarism.

In addition to the altar of Zeus, there was the temple of Athena and the shrine of Asclepius, the serpent-god who was the god of healing. He was called soter or savior. Pergamum was in fact the center of the cult of Asclepius, which had a large temple and medical school outside the city. In fact, Pergamum had the great medical school of that day; something like the Southwestern medical school here.

It was a place where people went and got their training; maybe Luke was trained there. We know that the famous physician Galen was a man who studied there. One of the older commentators, R.H. Charles, called Pergamum “the Lourdes of the ancient world,” and if you’re familiar with Lourdes in France, you know that that is a place where many Roman Catholics make their pilgrimages to obtain healing.

Well, thousands of people came to Pergamum in the same way, seeking healing from the god Asclepius. Many deities were honored in Pergamum. Its mountain was filled with pagan temples. But because it was the seat of imperial rule, it was also the seat of the imperial religion. In 29 B.C., the city built a temple to Augustus. Then a few years later it built two more temples to the Caesars.

So of all the seven cities of Asia, Pergamum was the one where the church was most liable to clash with the imperial cult, which was enforced by the imperial government located there. Emperor worship became a test of loyalty to the empire. In fact, really it wasn’t so much a spiritual issue with the Romans, this matter of emperor worship; it was a political issue. They didn’t care what god you worshipped.

You could worship as many gods as you want, as long as you paid homage to Caesar. Refusal to do that, to make that little pinch of incense, and put it on the shrine or the altar in Caesar’s temple, was tantamount to treason. So it is to this church, which lived in a very pagan and dangerous city, that the Lord introduces himself as “the one who has the sharp two-edged sword.”

The sword was the symbol of Roman authority. The governor bore the sword, and it was meant to symbolize all of the power that he had, and what the governor had was the power of life and death. Drawing upon that very important and well-known image, Christ tells the church that he is the one who has the sword. He is the real governor of this world. He is the sovereign Lord. He is the God and the ultimate power over life and death.

And it’s said to them in order to be an encouragement – encouragement to a threatened congregation in a dangerous place, to remind them of who is really in control of the circumstances of life, as dangerous and tenuous as they may be. It’s a good reminder for us as well. It’s not your boss. It’s not the governor. It’s not any individual, any human person. It is the Lord God. He’s in control, and so our loyalty is ultimately to him.

That’s what we must remember. Verse 13, he speaks, and he tells them that he knows where they are, and he knows the difficult environment in which they lived. “I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.” Twice he tells them that Pergamum is Satan’s place; it’s his throne, it’s where he dwells. That’s an intriguing description of this city – where Satan’s throne is.

Wonder what that means. Well, there are a lot of different suggestions that have been given to it, because our Lord doesn’t define that for us, and there are many different candidates or alternatives that have been offered up as the explanation for

Satan’s throne. The great altar of Zeus on the side of the mountain had the appearance of a throne overlooking the city and valley.

And Satan was certainly behind the worship of the heathen gods. The cult of Asclepius, the serpent god of healing, suggests Satan, particularly in a book where the devil is called “the old serpent.” Probably, though – and this seems to be the consensus, at least of most of the commentators that I consulted – the expression here is best understood in connection with the prominence Pergamum had as the center of emperor worship, which was enforced by the government.

A state religion is a powerful institution. It is able to exert a strong influence over the population and be a real danger to a small church, like this church in Pergamum was. History is filled with examples that demonstrate how dangerous and what a great threat a state church or state religion can be. And we find these examples even in Christian lands throughout Europe and Britain, where the state put people to death, or deprived ministers of their living.

The burning of the Smithfield martyrs in London in the 16th century, and the persecution of the Covenanters in Scotland in the 17th century – all of that was the work of a state religion. It is satanic. It was designed to force conformity, and that’s what was happening in Pergamum. It was in a city where a pagan government was enforcing a state religion of paganism; emperor worship.

There was in that a great temptation to yield; to burn a little incense to Caesar, and escape the horrific dangers that these people did face. But by God’s grace, they did not do that. They remained faithful. They had not yielded, by the time our Lord is writing to them, to the pressure to confess Caesar as lord, and save their lives by denying the faith. They stayed loyal to Christ; some had even given their lives for the faith.

Antipas was one. The Lord recalls that. “You hold fast my name and did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my witness and faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.” Nothing is known about Antipas. We don’t really know anything about him other than what is written here, but the context suggests that he was a prominent individual in the church who was killed by the local authorities for his faith, for not confessing Caesar as lord.

Evidently it was an intense period of persecution when he was put to death, because the Lord recalls their faithfulness even in the days of Antipas. That is, “even in those dark days, even in those very trying times, you didn’t deny my faith,” he says. “You hold fast

my name.” So they didn’t deny his faith in those days, and they were presently holding fast his name.

Now, often in the Bible, the name stands for the person that has the name. It defines him or her, and we see that all through the Old Testament, very prominently in names like Abram, and Abraham – Abram, exalted father, and then the promises given to him of all these descendants that he will have, and his name is changed to Abraham, father of a multitude. You have it with Jacob, whose name is saved to Israel.

Those names are significant. They mean something. And so it is throughout the Old Testament, and particularly when you come to Isaiah and the great prophecies there, such as in chapter 7 and the name Immanuel and others as well; they speak of the person and the work. And that’s what the name of Christ signifies. It is the revelation of who he is and what he has done.

For Christ to praise them for holding his name, not forsaking his name, means that they affirmed him. They did not deny his person or his work, which is essential to Christianity. Christianity is Christ. Christianity is not morality. We have a morality, of course. There’s a system of ethics. This letter bears that out, because they were stumbling in regard to that. But Christianity essentially is not morality; it is Christ, the person and work of Christ.

And a Christian is one who believes in Christ. That means believing that he is the eternal Son of God, very God of very God, as the Nicene Creed put it. It is believing that he became a true man. He’s fully God, fully man. That he died as a sacrifice for sinners – in fact, his sacrificial death was a substitutionary death. That’s essential to understanding the gospel, and who and what Christ has done.

And that he not only died as a sacrifice for sinners, but he was raised bodily, physically from the dead, as proof that the Father accepted his sacrifice for us. And it is believing that his sacrifice alone saves, and not our works – that is the gospel, that is the message. We’re not saved by our works. We’re not even saved by our faith.

Hear a lot about faith today. I heard a little discussion on the radio the other day when I was driving somewhere about faith, and it was a kind of Christian discussion generally about faith, and how valuable it is, and how powerful it is. And people calling in from all over the country, talking about how valuable faith is. It was a kind of a discussion against the secularization of things today.

But they talk like faith has great power. Faith does not have great power. Now, the author of Hebrews tells us this in chapter 11, that without faith it’s impossible to please God, but it’s impossible to please God without the faith that’s in the right object. Everyone has faith. Every religion is a religion of faith. Paul gave somewhat guarded praise to the Jews for their zeal, but he said, “It’s zeal without knowledge.”

That is, they have great faith in what they hold to; it’s just that it’s in the wrong object. You see that in Islam today. We’re certainly aware that there are people in that religion that have strong faith, but materialists, atheists. They have faith. They have faith in their denial of God, and their whole ideology. Faith is nothing without the proper object. Faith lays hold of that. It’s the object of our faith that saves us.

It’s the person and work of Christ that saves us. We are saved through him alone, and our faith simply receives what he has obtained for us at the cross. Now, that’s the gospel. The gospel is not believe – your faith saves you. No. It’s believe in the one who saves you. Lay hold of the person and work of Jesus Christ. And doing that, holding that, believing that gospel, is what it means to hold fast Christ’s name.

The Christians of Pergamum were doing that. They held fast to the confession of faith, and did so against very strong pressure to compromise. I spoke last week of the old Bishop Polycarp, who went to a martyr’s death there in Smyrna. As he was being taken to the Roman official there to be tried for his faith, two officials accompanied him, and they tried to persuade him to deny Christ and save his life.

They liked Polycarp; they didn’t want to see him die, and so they asked him, “What’s the harm in saying, ‘Lord Caesar’ and making a sacrifice; just a little sacrifice.” And of course as you think about it like that, it does seem like a small thing. Just go into the temple and offer a pinch of incense, say a few words, and you’re off the hook. You save your life. Well, that was strong pressure; so little to keep so much.

But Polycarp refused, and he paid with his life, because he knew that a small compromise would have been everything. Antipas was that kind of man, and the church of Pergamum was as well a faithful church against strong Satanic enemies. There is a lot to admire in the Christians of Pergamum, and the Lord reassures them that he knows their situation, and that he was with them, and he would continue to be with them.

But as admirable as the church was, the Lord had a complaint. It didn’t apply to everyone, but it would affect everyone if it was not dealt with quickly. He says in verse 14, “I have a few things against you,” and the few things really reduce to one. “You have there

some who hold to the teaching of Balaam.” And then he later, in verse 15, identifies them as Nicolaitans. They followed the example of Balaam.

We really don’t know much about the Nicolaitans. We discussed that a little bit two weeks ago, because that was also a problem with the church at Ephesus, these Nicolaitans. Evidently, they had an aberrant moral understanding of things. They were antinomian, and they had heretical views in other ways as well, no doubt. But particularly, they had a teaching that was immoral.

It followed the example of Balaam, the false prophet whose story is told to us in the book of Numbers. You remember it, I’m sure. Balak, the king of Moab, was very disturbed by this large nation of Israelites that had come out of Egypt and were about to cross over the Jordan. And he was fearful of them, that they may take possession of his land, so he hired Balaam, the prophet from the East, to come and curse the Israelites.

He evidently had a reputation for being very good at cursing people and putting a hex on them, and so he calls him to do that and pays him quite a bit of money. And he stands up there and pronounces his curses, but the Lord turns his curses into blessings. In fact, one of his curses that’s a blessing is one of the great messianic prophecies of the Old Testament; Numbers 24:17, of a star that would come forth from Jacob.

Well, his failure to curse, and instead, bless, infuriated Balak, the king. He paid a lot of money to get good curses, and got just the opposite. But Balaam had a second plan, and really, it was even more effective than his curses, and this one would entice Israel into committing idolatry. He advised Balak to send girls into the camp of Israel and seduce the men. The plan worked.

Numbers 25 says, “The people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab, and bowed down to their gods.” So they commit immorality, and then they commit apostasy. The Lord calls the teaching of Balaam “a stumbling block.” Balaam kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel. He led them into a compromise with paganism, and with immorality.

He enticed them into practicing both – as though you can worship a false God and worship the Lord at the same time. As though you can be obedient to the law, and immoral at the same time. You cannot be. This was the problem in Pergamum. Christians were compromising with the morals of the city. The Lord says that some in the congregation were teaching them to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality.

Now, from the connection with Balaam, we should probably understand this eating of meat sacrificed to idols, and the acts of immorality, to be associated with the pagan festivals. They seem to be prominent in some of these cities of Asia Minor that these letters are written to. But we don’t need to limit it to religious feasts. The immorality amongst the Gentiles was commonplace.

The Greeks and Romans were notorious for their casual attitude towards sex. In fact, we could say their aggressive approach to it. Now, that’s why at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, where Jewish and Gentile believers were recognized as equals in Christ, and Gentiles were not required to be circumcised, James did insist that Gentiles abstain from fornication. Now, as you read that, you might be puzzled.

As you read through the book of Acts and you come to that instruction, you might think, “Why in the world would he say that? I mean abstaining from fornication would seem to be a given. Why does he need to say abstain from that?” But it was not a given in the Gentile world. Temple prostitution was common, as were all kinds of immoral practices. You see that through the reading of 1 Corinthians.

The problems they had in the church, the background of so many of those people, what they were saved from, so those who had been saved out of that had to be instructed in a higher morality. In Pergamum, the opposite was occurring. Some were teaching that it was permissible to lower the standards; to have no standards. And since most had been saved out of paganism, we would assume, it was easy to fall back into those old practices and conform to the morals of the city; to compromise.

It’s a problem we face today, the temptation to adopt society’s moral standards. We are constantly under pressure to conform to the world around us; to think and live like everyone else does. And sometimes teachers even come into assemblies, into churches, and they teach distorted views about grace; under the guise of Christian liberty they teach that we can lower our standards.

That we can sin all the more that grace might abound all the more; we’re covered by grace from all of these things. And let’s face it, that appeals to the natural part of us. It appeals to our flesh, and it is certainly easier to live that way – easier to live an undisciplined life, to not strive to live a godly life. But that teaching is from the pit. Pergamum was a dark place; it was the place where Satan dwells, and he is the author of error and temptation.

He filled the city with pagan temples, shrines, altars, and anti-Christian philosophies, and in those ways, by means of all of that, he maintained his hold on the world, blinding people with attractive lies. But he also works within the church in the same way, with error, but in a much more subtle way – through leaders that identify themselves as Christians, and use all the right language.

That’s what Paul describes, remember, in 2 Corinthians 11:13, where he speaks of deceitful workers disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. Disguise themselves as philosophers of Plato, or as priests of some pagan god – no, they were apostles. They were like those who have the words of the Lord, the words of truth. That’s how they passed themselves off and gave their message credibility.

That’s what the devil does; this is how he behaves. This is how he presents himself. We have this popular notion in our minds that he’s sort of a comical figure in a red suit with a tail and cloven hooves and a fork and all of that. He’s not that at all. He’s actually a very sophisticated, winsome spirit, and he presents himself, disguises himself as an angel of light. He’s a deceiver. He’s a seducer.

He is the master at making evil and error appear beautiful, either by cloaking evil and error in the glorious temples that were in that city, or disguising error in biblical language. His wiles and his stratagems are designed to disarm people, cause them to lower their guard, and then draw them away from the truth and into sin and error.

A few months ago, a book was published about Henry Ward Beecher, who in the middle of the 19th century was probably the most celebrated preacher in America. I didn’t read the book, but I read a book review on it. Mr. Beecher was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, so he had a prominent family, quite a name, and he was a very gifted man.

He was a dramatic preacher, a witty preacher, who reduced Christianity to morality. He denied a literal hell; he stressed the love of God, and he emphasized politics and social reform, not doctrine. The crisis in his life was that he was living a lie in all of this. He preached morality, but all the time through his career he was having affairs with numerous women in the congregation.

The reviewer, George Marsden, the prominent church historian, wrote that “he may have persuaded the women that such relationships were justifiable by a higher spirituality.” In other words, he had a theological justification for sinning, and he was persuasive. Well,

he was put on trial for adultery, and it became a famous trial; it became the focus of attention all over the nation.

But as Mr. Marsden wrote, “his charm was so great that he survived with his reputation only slightly tarnished.” Well, Satan’s ministers are like that. They’re charming individuals. They appear as lights, and that’s what was happening in Pergamum. That’s the teaching of Balaam. It is a teaching that encourages compromise, and justifies sin by giving similarly plausible excuses for it – excuses from the Bible, using the right words.

But sin is never an option. We have been saved from sin, not just saved from the consequences of sin, not just saved from the judgment of sin – we have been saved from the very power of sin. God has made us to be a new creation, and commands us to live new lives. The first command that the apostle Paul gives in the book of Romans is in 6:11, and there he says, “Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

In other words, this is how you live your life as a Christian: think correctly about yourself. That’s step one – realize who you are. Now, I find it very significant that the first command, the first instruction on how to live our lives in the book of Romans, the apex of the New Testament, comes five and a half chapters into the book.

Paul has spent the first five and a half chapters laying the foundation, laying the groundwork for a proper Christian life by developing doctrine, such as total depravity, the universal guilt of sin, the guilt of men, and then giving us the remedy for it in chapter 3, in the propitiation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the sacrifice that he made, the reconciliation that’s in him and how we’re saved through faith alone in our representative head.

He lays the groundwork for all of that before he tells us how to live, and that’s essential for living a godly life, an orderly, wise life: knowing the great doctrines of Scripture and having a consistent theology. But then with that, we must consider ourselves to be who we are in Christ, and that is dead to sin but alive to God in him. And then later on, in chapter 12:2, he says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Well, you renew your mind through study of the Word of God and the doctrine that is present there – understanding it, spending time in it. But what he says is “don’t be conformed to this world.” That’s another way of saying what our motto ought to be, and that is “no compromise.” We’re to be different from the world. But in Pergamum, many were conforming.

So this same congregation that was uncompromising in its witness to the world was compromising in its response to sin in the church. The Lord’s response is sharp and clear in verse 16. “Repent,” he says, and the force of that statement is “stop now what you’re doing. Stop now being indifferent, and make an immediate and complete break with these Nicolaitans.”

It’s a command given to the whole church. Only some, a few, had fallen into this error, but the whole church was guilty of not taking action against it; of tolerating this. The fault in Pergamum was the opposite of Ephesus, where they dealt decisively with the Nicolaitans, and they drove them out of the church. That’s what the Lord requires. We’re not to tolerate heresy and immorality.

The church in Corinth was doing that, remember. That’s one of the concerns that Paul has in his first epistle. There was a young man there who was engaged in an illicit relationship with his stepmother, and the Corinthians were just tolerating it; turning a blind eye to it, or even saying, “Well, you know, we can sin, and grace will abound all the more.”

And Paul says, “No, no – you have to deal with that immediately. In fact, I’ve already taken steps to deal with that young man myself.” But then he goes on later to talk about getting rid of the leaven, because a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough, and that was the danger here. So they were to root this problem out of the congregation. If they did not, Christ says he would.

He was coming quickly, he says, “and I will make war against them” – against these Christians who are involved in this sin, against these Nicolaitans as well. And he will do so, he says, “with the sword of my mouth.” That’s a warning of judgment. But to those who do respond, and who obey, the Lord holds out the promise of verse 17; that he will give to them hidden manna and a white stone.

Hidden manna is probably a reference to the pot of manna that was hidden in the Ark of the Covenant and placed in the Holy of Holies. Manna, you know, is God’s provision for the children of Israel as they went through their wilderness wandering for 40 years. It was his supernatural supply of heavenly food that sustained their lives.

And here, it means that the faithful believer will be given spiritual food, spiritual nourishment, spiritual care, I think in a special way. Something similar to what Jesus spoke of to his disciples when they came to him in John chapter 4, and he’s by the well, and the woman has gone into the city. And they come back with food and he tells them that he had food that they didn’t know of.

It’s food, spiritual food that the pagan festivals can’t give. It’s spiritual nourishment that worldly luxuries can’t supply us with. This is something else. This is communion with God and what he blesses us with in the abundant life. The other promise is the white stone. That’s a rather enigmatic promise; in fact, one of the commentators calculated over a dozen possible interpretations.

You read the commentators, and they’re generally candid about the fact that we really don’t know what this is. But there are some good suggestions, and one is that in law courts of that day, a white stone was used for acquittal, a black stone for condemnation. And in light of that it’s interesting that in Acts 26:10 Paul speaks of casting votes against Christians before he was one, while he was a persecuting Pharisee.

And the word for “vote” in Greek is the word for “pebble” or “stone” – a voting stone. So here, it seems that what the Lord is saying is that those who are faithful and obedient will be acquitted of wrongdoing, and they’ll be exempt; they won’t come under this severe discipline that the Lord threatens. On the stone, they’re told, would be written a new name. He would give that to them, which, he says, no one knows but he who receives it.

The name, as we’ve said already, represents the person, his or her character. Christ, in other words, will transform their character, give them a new name, give them a special relationship with him. Close friends have special names for each other; they give each other nicknames. Husbands and wives have that, special names for one another. I read somewhere years ago that Spurgeon had a name for his wife; he called her “wifey,” a nice little name.

No one else called her that; that was his special name for her. Each one of us is of infinite importance to the Lord. He has that close relationship to us, but he’s promising here that as one is faithful, he enters into even deeper fellowship and knowledge of him. That is a great promise, to have deep fellowship with the Son of God, the Creator of all things, the Infinite One – that’s what he promises.

For those who overcome – who are faithful through trials – they will be changed, and they will be blessed greatly, so the implication of that is that we are to be overcoming. We’re to be diligent in that. How does a person really do that? How does a person overcome rebellion in the world, error in the church, indifference in our heart? These are the problems the people of Pergamum faced.

The answer to that is the sword. That’s what Christ brought to the church. That’s how he begins this letter – “The one who has the sharp two-edged sword says.” The sword is the Word of God. Paul calls the Word of God “the sword of the Spirit” in Ephesians 6:17. The author of Hebrews says it is sharper than any two-edged sword, dividing soul and spirit, so we must use the sword in the world in the gospel.

It’s through the proclamation of God’s Word, it’s through the proclamation of the gospel, that people are saved, that they are delivered from the temples and the cults of this age. And we must use the sword in the church. The only way the church will be mature, and grow, and be wise to the wiles and the schemes of the devil, be alert and discerning in regard to his false teachers, is through an accurate knowledge of the Bible.

It is by having a firm foundation in our hearts and minds of God’s doctrine and the Word of God. And then, of course, we must turn the sword on ourselves. We must study the Bible personally. We must examine ourselves in light of the Scripture. Scripture alone is sufficient for faith and practice; for creed and conduct. We must seek to know God’s truth. That’s basic to knowing the Lord and loving him.

You want to hold onto his name? Well, you need to know what his name represents in order to hold onto it. You want to know him personally, and grow in that relationship – and there’s no greater blessing than that. In fact, that’s how our Lord in John 17:3 defines eternal life; it’s knowing God and knowing Jesus Christ. Well, to know him we need to know about him. We need to know everything we can about him.

And there’s an endless well of knowledge about him in the Word of God; that’s where we’re to spend our time, studying it. It’s sufficient – and learn about who he is and what he’s done. That he is the Son of God who became the Son of Man; he is the sovereign God who became the Savior; the King who put himself upon a cross. We understand that – understand who he is and what he sacrificed.

That kindles hearts and sets them aflame, so that we want to hold onto his name and live for him. That’s what we get from the sword. That’s our weapon. That’s our only weapon. But someday the sword, which heals souls, will destroy souls. Christ will return in judgment. We’ll read about that when we come to it in Revelation 19:15, because he says that he will have a sharp sword; it will be a sword of war, and he will wield it against the world.

The story of Balaam didn’t end with the seduction of the Israelites. It ended with the prophet being slain with a sword, and that’s the end for all who reject Christ. So if there

are any here who have not believed in Jesus Christ – oh, you believe in Jesus, but then you begin to look at the Jesus you believed in, and he’s not the Jesus of the Word of God – if you’ve not believed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

As God and Savior, as the one who is the eternal Son of God, who became a man and offered himself up on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners, and if you’re not trusting in that and that alone for salvation, we invite you to do so. Come to him, turn to him, look to him, believe in him. That’s all you are asked to do – simply trust in him. Not yourself, not your works, in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

And he will save you, because he’s made a sufficient sacrifice for everyone who believes in him. So look to him, believe in him. May God help you to do that, and help each one of us to hold onto his name and be faithful, non-compromising in this world. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness to us, your faithfulness to us. Keep us faithful to you. Keep us faithful to your Son, our God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for him and for his death, and all that we have in him. It’s in his name we pray. Amen.