

## WEEK 4: STAYING THE COURSE

### Pergamum and Thyatira

#### REVELATION 2:12-17: THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

##### Supplies List:

2 presenter/readers (A and B, 1<sup>st</sup> section below)

Bible

Notes

Bible(s) for focal point

A bowl of small white or light-gray stones

A candle and matches

Permanent black marking pens

**OPTIONAL FOCAL POINT:** Arrange Bible(s) in a central location, along with a bowl of pale, pocket-sized stones and a lit candle.

##### Potential songs:

‘You are the Rock of my Salvation’

‘On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand’

‘Lead me to the Rock’

Have someone read Revelation 2:12-17: To the Church in Pergamum

#### INTRODUCTION

A. In our modern post modern society, which places so much emphasis on ‘experience,’ it is essential that our structures find ways to touch peoples hearts. The only body without emotions is a corpse!

There are so many creative means of expressing the gospel! Music for example. Music has been described as being the most important influence in people’s lives these days with the exception of television – and what do we hear on television? Music of course! CS Lewis suggested sixty

years ago that it would be through the performing arts that Western Europe would again be impacted with the gospel.

What we can never afford to forget is that the Word of God is our ultimate bedrock, our ultimate truth and yardstick. There is no other ‘safe’ way to build our lives than on its foundation. The Church we are going to be looking at today, Pergamum, was in danger of sidestepping biblical teaching and compromising with the spirit of the age – just as all too many churches today have been sidelined by liberal theology and worldly attitudes.

## *INTO THE PAST*

**A. Geographically** If you go forty miles north along the sea coast from Ephesus, turn north-east, then head fifteen miles inland to the Valley of the Caicus, you will reach the city of Pergamos – the capital of the Province of Asia.

Like all capital cities it prided itself on having an atmosphere all its own (just like London, Edinburgh, Paris and Berlin do). Pergamum had centuries of greatness behind her. Pergamum was known as an intellectual centre, with all the humanistic pride and status that implies. The library had some 200,000 volumes, and the word “parchment” is derived from the name ‘Pergamos.’ In 133 BC Pergamum chose to follow Rome rather than Greece.

**B. Pergamum was a centre of religious worship – but John boldly describes it as the seat of Satan (Rev. 2:13).** Who did the people worship? Above the many other gods, Aesculapius, (or Asklepios as the Greeks called him) – the “god of feeling”. Asklepios was also called Asklepios Sôtçr – Asklepios the Saviour. So far as Christians are concerned, that represents a counterfeit god! From all over Asia Minor, suffering people streamed to its courts. Think of it as the Lourdes of the ancient world – with the Temple providing medical wards, medical schools, priests and votaries.

**A. There are strong temptations in every age for the Church to compromise.** Has there ever been a culture as carried away, misled, and seduced by ‘feelings’ as our own? Certainly no previous generation has

made such an industry out of entertainment. What is good and what is bad about that?

Ann Graham Lotz, Billy Graham's daughter, tells us that the Christians in Pergamum, rather than "separating themselves from the falsely religious and intellectual society around them, accommodated themselves to it."

**B. Pergamos was a place of intensive spiritual warfare.** It was right there where anti-God forces congregated that the church of Pergamos dwelt – where Satan wielded special authority. The word 'dwelt' literally means 'to live in permanently.' It is as though the Lord is saying the Christians were not to be there just temporarily: they had to go *on* living there, not trying to escape but to be overcomers where they were. The idea that Christians should automatically vacate the inner cities in search of the suburbs as their wealth increases is not necessarily God's priority for their lives, let alone His strategy for taking cities for Himself.

**A. Idolatry was everywhere in Pergamos.** A hotbed of Caesar worship, this was a city that took its devotion to their Roman ruler seriously. Christians regarded this as nothing less than giving worship to Satan – which made Pergamos a supremely perilous place for them to live in.

In many cities Christians faced danger only on the appointed day each year when incense had to be burned, and people reaffirmed their declaration that "Caesar is Lord." For the rest of the year, however, they were largely left in peace. In Pergamos, however, followers of Christ feared for their lives 24/7, and three hundred and sixty five days a year. Their loyalty to Jesus Christ meant that they were constantly risking their lives. Paul spoke of facing death all day long. (Rom. 8:36) Think how challenging that would be for every part of the nervous system.

The newly forming church in Pergamum, as yet almost without a history, was struggling to sustain its integrity – perhaps its very existence – in a city taken up by its long and proud history. Against a background of academic pride; with all the arrogance of heathenism and its pagan wisdom (not to mention the magnificence of the worship of the Olympian gods), Christians were tempted to feel weak and helpless – just as they do in many Muslim countries to this day.

**A.** Think of Christians who have made similarly decisions to stay put in our own day. We could start with the Gadarene who was once known as ‘Legion’. (Mark 5:1-20) Once Jesus had set him free from his demons, he sent the man back to his own land to tell people what He had done for them. We can imagine that this would have been a very difficult place to be a follower of Jesus – but people were amazed by this man’s testimony! Pray for people who are called to serve in hard places.

Some friends of ours were missionaries in Albania. During the Kosovo war, despite extreme peril (they had a bullet come through their living room, narrowly missing their five children) they made the costly decision to stay put even though strong pressure was on them to leave. They believed that if they left they would be no better than ‘hirelings and false shepherds’ rather than true pastors of the flock of Christ. God honoured their courageous stance. They were even able to give an unedited testimony to the Lord’s goodness on the main BBC news!

**B:** What qualities do we need to stay the course? Perhaps above all perseverance. (We looked at the need for patient endurance in Revelation 2:2). Biblical teaching on perseverance cuts against the modern way of thinking that if something is difficult, give up and get on with something else. Visions, like most good things in life, are usually only accomplished by perseverance.

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. (Hebrews 6:10-12)

### INTO THE WORD

**2:13** Antipas is the only martyr we read of by name in the Book of Revelation, and it was at Pergamum that he went to be with the Lord. The word *martus* ‘witness’ quickly came to mean a ‘martyr’ in the sense that we normally associate with it

Jesus called Himself, “The Faithful Witness” using the word *martus*. In other words, Jesus was giving to Antipas nothing less than His own

title. To suffer for Christ, in the end, enables us to share in the glory of Christ. The crown is always worth the Cross – but without the Cross there would be no crown.

Given that we may not be physically persecuted, we should not be surprised if we find ourselves suffering for our Christian faith and principles. Can you think of examples of this in your own life? Don't forget the many exhortations in the New Testament: e.g.

*that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:*

*"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,  
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you*

*(Heb. 12:5)*

Likewise, do not be

*surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

*(1 Pet. 4:12-16)*

**2:14 In verse 14 the praise runs out stops and the rebuke and warnings begin.** There were those in Pergamos who were trying to teach the people in the church of Pergamos to sin. They were encouraging them to eat things sacrificed to idols. There was a real danger that, by giving in to these orgiastic feasts, the Christian church would catch the infection of heathenism and, in the end, be swamped by the surrounding sea of paganism.

**B.** In verse 16 we see false teachers encouraging the believers in Pergamos to conform to the accepted standards of the world – to stop trying to be different.

The church must resist all suggestions of compromise, including the encouragement to commit fornication.

**A.** The Greek world had no problem embracing the idea of extra marital relationships. Demosthenes said,

We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation and wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian of our household affairs.’

**B.** The Risen Lord does not say, ‘I will fight against you.’ He says ‘I will fight against *them*.’ His wrath is not directed against the whole church but against those who are encouraging others to take the wrong way. The greatest anger of Christ is against those who teach others to sin#.

**A. Who is at risk?** Society then, as today, all too easily ensnares believers who are prepared to ‘accommodate’ the truth and their testimony to suit its values. This is an anathema to the risen Lord Jesus, who, as we have seen, is Jesus, the bearer of the sharp two-edged sword. He is not afraid to state things as they really are. As Ann Graham Lotz reminds us, the Bible speaks about the devil as well as God, about judgement as well as salvation, and about hell as well as heaven.

The Lord knows how hard it is for us to thrive in a place where satanic forces are at work in the very atmosphere of the place, striving either to impose a rigid, loveless orthodoxy, or, more frequently, to entice people to declare that what is in the Bible is not enough – and that they need something more.

**2:17** The hidden manna, which those who overcome will eat, refers to the manna that was placed inside the Ark of the Covenant, in the holy place before God. Considered to be angels’ food, or bread from heaven (16:4), the manna was due to be seen and tasted again when the Age of the Messiah dawned. The point was that those on this earth who refused to eat meat that had been offered to idols would, in the world to come, eat the Bread of Heaven. In the short term this would mean forgoing earthly pleasures, but only in order to obtain a Heavenly reward. The fear of the Lord helps us to take such considerations seriously.

**B.** As for the reference to the white stone, in ancient times judicial decisions were made by casting stones into an urn. White stones symbolised acquittal, and black stones condemnation. The message is

that if we are faithful, God will acquit us, and we will be counted among the number of the people of God.

A. White stones were also symbols of happy days. It was essentially the symbol of the day of victory – much as we would speak of a ‘red letter day.’

One who was faithful would be reckoned as a victor and be royally received into Heaven. Even amid the perils of Pergamos no one could pluck a Christian from the hand of Christ.

### INTO THE HEART

\*Option 1: ‘Testimony.’ Either invite someone the week beforehand to share the following, or break into smaller groups and have one or two people briefly share what they’ve learned as a Christian about the dangers of ‘giving in’ to peer group pressure, and to the ‘normal’ standards of our culture. What do they regret? How would they handle it differently next time? What has worked well? Are they currently feeling any pressure to accommodate or ‘blend in’? If so, pray for one another.

\*Option 2: ‘Stones of Remembrance.’ Follow the above activity by passing the stones round and writing relevant action word(s), or verb(s), on one of the stones, such as: believe, endure, hope, resolve, witness, etcetera.

\*Option 3: Break for tea and a stretch before starting the second section. Share the messages on your stones with each other.

Re-gather with a song:

Have someone read Revelation 2:18-29: To the Church in Thyatira

### INTO THE PAST

Thyatira was, humanly speaking, a less important community than the other cities we have considered. It was not a natural fortress, but it served as the gateway city to Pergamum. Its main function was to delay an enemy until Pergamum was fully armed and ready to resist. Thyatira was fated, therefore, to be captured, razed to the ground, and rebuilt, because it was ‘on the way’ to a major city. Because it was not a centre of special

religious importance, the church would not have faced either the “splendour” of heathen religion, or the menace of Caesar worship.

The city did, however, have an oriental sibyl, called the Sambatethç. Many people consulted the oracle at her shrine for guidance. It was also a major commercial centre, a centre of the wool trade and the dyeing industry. It was from Thyatira that Lydia, the seller of purple, came (Acts 16:14). Purple dye was extremely expensive. The city also possessed more trade guilds than any other town of its size in Asia and it was from these powerful guilds that the chief danger to the church at Thyatira came.

No merchant or trader could hope to prosper unless he was a member of a trade guild. The social activities of these trade guilds were intimately bound up with the worship of the heathen gods. The guilds shared common meals together, which would begin and end with a cup of wine poured out as an offering to the gods – heathenised ‘grace’ before and after the meal. How could a Christian join in such a ceremony, where the meat had already been offered to Apollo, or Artemis, or to the local god?

These feasts degenerated into drunken and immoral carousing. Belonging to the guilds, however, protected a merchant’s business interests. To refuse to join was tantamount to committing commercial suicide. The church was very clear, however, that no Christian should have anything to do with these guilds. The believer needed to draw a line in the sand and make the costly decision to keep his garments unspotted from the world.

At the centre of the problem was a woman known as ‘Jezebel’ who was arguing that Christians should become members of the guilds, attend the heathen functions, and compromise with the heathen world and worship and thereby protect their business interests. Every Christian in Thyatira would have to choose, therefore, between business prosperity and loyalty to Jesus Christ.

The original Jezebel (from Sidon) had brought her own gods and goddesses into Israel (Baal, and Astharte) and imposed them on the nation, thereby defiling the worship of the True God.# This latter day Jezebel was seducing Christians away from the worship of the True God, by permitting, perhaps even encouraging, fornication and eating of food sacred to idols. Who was she? It is most unlikely that she was the same as Sambatethç, the priestess of the local oracle. (2:20). There certainly

were Jewish renegades who became famous soothsayers and fortune tellers, but it hardly fits the tone of the letter, which shows the peril threatening the Christians as coming from *inside* the church.

This Jezebel must have been a woman of strong personality, of great ambition and powerful influence. If her arguments (that Christians ought to compromise with the world) had succeeded, it would have spelt the end of the Christian Church there. It would have meant being unfaithful to Christ and embracing heathenism. The continued existence of the Church depended its continued determination to be conformed to Christ rather than to secular role models – just as it does in our own day.

### *INTO THE PRESENT*

When a business society demands conduct and practice which is not Christian, what is a Christian to do? Is trade to come first, or Christ? The situation in Thyatira is curiously modern. There are thousands of men and women today who are facing – or evading – the same choices that confronted the Christians of Thyatira 1800 years ago.

Remember, it was not the threat of persecution which menaced the church so much as the danger caused by those members within the church, who proposed the most dangerous of all doctrines: the doctrine of compromise. We ignore this danger at our peril

### *INTO THE WORD*

**2:19** The Lord needed to warn the believers at Thyatira that they would suffer intensely for what they were doing unless they repented. It was essential for their well-being to heed the warning. There is much we can learn from the way the Lord set about this task.

Although the letter to the church of Thyatira is a letter of warning and of criticism, it begins with undiluted praise. Here is something we can all take to heart. Whatever challenges and corrections we need to make, we must still encourage constantly, and never discourage people to the point where they are unable to function. When we have reason to rebuke or criticise others, we must make it clear that we are doing so

- not because we dislike them, but because we like them.

- not because we think they are useless, but because we think they have it in them to be useful.

- not because we are eager to hurt them, but because we want to find ways to help them.

**2:23** The Risen Lord says that *He searches the reins (or hearts)*. *Reins* are the kidneys, which in Hebrew thought are considered to be the seat of the emotions, whilst the heart, *cardiac*, was considered to be the intellectual centre, the source of our thought life. Both our emotional life and our intellectual life are laid bare to the Lord's scrutiny – and only He can cleanse us on the inside that we can bear the gaze of His eyes.

**2:24** What are the deep things of Satan? In this case, they probably refer to the Gnostics, who claimed that Christians need to know far more than the simple truths of the Gospel. The Gnostics claimed that a special, secret knowledge was needed, which, of course, only they could supply. The wonderful truth is rather that it is often amongst the simplest people in the world that Christianity thrives best: in places such as Mozambique and China for example.

So far astray did some Gnostic teaching go that certain people felt they had to experience the total depravity of life's experiences in order to live by the Grace of God. Paul, of course, teaches that this is not at all to be.

**2:26** The Risen Christ speaks of overcoming and *keeping My works unto the end*. As Barclay reminds us, the case.# There are two essentials in Christianity; one is a victory and the other is a long fidelity. The Christian life is less a battle than a campaign. From every human point of view the only thing which could possibly await the Church was total destruction and annihilation; from the divine point of view, however, what awaits the Church is total triumph. It was the conviction of the early church that the menacing might of Rome was as nothing compared with the gracious power of God.

### *INTO THE PRESENT*

Whilst some of us are deluded by our self importance, more of us are hampered and deluded by our feelings of insignificance. This can be so strong that they drive many to get rid of what they have, because they either appear insignificant or too hard to bear even. We feel it is of no

consequence; we have experienced so much rejection and received so much criticism and abuse that we feel so undermined that we are desperate to escape the pressure in our heads and to start again – even if that means “discarding” all we currently have: children, marriages, relationships, jobs, or even our own life. This is why, we need to look, once again, to Jesus and let His hope begin to refill our heart. He is the First and the Last, Who died and came to life again (Rev 2:8).

For those of you who have poured out your life out for people who don't seem to notice or care, don't confuse their lack of response with God not appreciating all you have given, and all you have suffered in His service. It is easy for us to draw the line and to say, effectively, ‘Thus far and no further – “I'm opting out.”’ No wonder Jesus says so often, *Do not be afraid* (Rev 2:10). Nothing but courage and perseverance will enable us to take our stand and keep going.

There is no guarantee we will not suffer for taking such a stand. The Christians in China have paid a huge price for doing so – but the Lord has brought great blessing out of that. There will be an end to suffering. It may exceed the literal ten days mentioned in Revelation 2:10b, but there *will* be an end to it. All ostracism, persecution and rejection will come to an end: in eternity, if not before. That is why the Lord challenges the suffering church in Smyrna, *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the Crown of Life*.

There is sadness in the Lord's heart whenever we put someone else before Him. May we never encounter the Lord's eyes of blazing fire (Rev 2:18b), as the church of Thyatira did for welcoming Jezebel – who was no doubt a very charismatic personality, but one who took the line that to win the world for Christ you need to be more like the world. Whatever her precise tactics, Jezebel led the church astray into immorality of all kinds. It soon resembled the world so closely that you could hardly tell the difference.

What was missing in Thyatira was holiness and purity. The letter to this church is crucial for our generation, because it is the clean and awesome fear of the Lord that is so often the missing ingredient in the Church.

God is not mocked. If something is wrong, the fact that other people are doing it is not an acceptable excuse.

Neither positive thinking nor modern “morality” is a substitute for holiness. That is why Jesus speaks to those who did not hold to Jezebel’s teaching and tells them to *hold on to what they have until He comes* (vv. 24-25).

Those who overcome will be entrusted with early spiritual authority (2:26-27), and will be given the Morning Star (v28). The Christian will not only rise over the darkness of death, it is also a promise of Christ Himself, for in Revelation 22:16 the Risen Christ says, *I am the bright morning star*. The one who is faithful unto death will receive the greatest prize of all – no other and no less than Jesus Christ Himself.

\*Option: Allow a time for prayer in smaller groups for those who feel used, unappreciated, fearful of suffering, or convicted of having bailed out on what God wanted for them.

Have someone close the time with prayer for us to be built together in love as ‘living stones,’ ‘sealing-up’ those God-given, action words that were written earlier on each literal stone.