

Revelation 2:12-3:6 // Pergamum and Sardis: Wake Up!

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Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Revelation 2, on page 1,234 in the Church Bibles. Revelation chapter 2, starting at verse 12, and then we're going to jump into chapter 3.

So, Revelation 2, verse 12. To the angel of the church in Pergamum write, These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

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

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you. There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin, so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent, therefore. Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

[1 : 21] Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give him some of the hidden manna.

I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. And then moving to chapter 3, verse 1. To the angel of the church in Sardis write, These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up. Strengthen what remains and is about to die. For I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard. Hold it fast and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one whose victorious will, like them, be dressed in white.

[2 : 33] I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Great. Thanks so much, Ali, for reading. Good evening, St Silas. My name is Martin Ayers. If you've not met, I'm a lead pastor here. Some of you may have come tonight because it said in the service sheets that it was communion.

And I'm sorry, that was a mistake. It's not communion. Some of you might have come because it said in the sheets it was Andy Gemmel preaching. I'm sorry, it's not Andy Gemmel. It's me. So should we have a moment if anyone wants to leave now?

But we do still have God's Word. So let's pray and ask for God's help. Let's pray. Those words from verse 17. Jesus says, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. So, Heavenly Father, we pray that you would indeed give us ears to hear. That we will, this evening, hear what your Spirit says to us. That we will read and mark and learn and digest your Word.

[3 : 45] And that you will sustain us and preserve us. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So, we're on tour at the moment with the risen Jesus Christ.

I don't know whether you enjoy watching travel programs. There's a trend at the moment for being shown around on a travel program by an expert in the area. That you're someone who knows the place.

So, Anton and Giovanni from Strictly have a series where they go on adventures in Sicily. Giovanni is showing Anton his home place. Or you can be shown around Mexico with Eva Longoria, who is Texican, raised in Texas with Mexican parents.

You can tour the Caribbean with Liz Bonin, whose mum's from Trinidad. Or Stanley Tucci, raised in America but Italian on both sides, is searching for Italy.

So, you've got all these options of looking around these places with experts. And when we get to Revelation, these early chapters, it's the risen Jesus taking us around what's now modern-day Turkey, but at the time was called Asia.

[4 : 55] And tonight, we're going with him, with his letter, into two first-century churches. The church in Pergamum and the church in Sardis.

That's what's going on at the start of this book, Revelation. Revelation is a book that has literally shaped the lives of millions of people. What God says to us in this book.

And in this section, chapters 2 and 3, Jesus is writing letters to seven churches, real churches, real people, in the first century. And there's something very appropriate and complete about the seven churches that are addressed.

That the instructions and the encouragements and the challenges and the truth that Jesus writes to these seven churches are kind of representative of what every church needs in every age to hear from him.

Sometimes we'll hear what Jesus says to a church and we'll think, that really applies to us. Other times, we might not think that. We might sober-mindedly look and think, actually, the things they're being praised for, we haven't really done.

[6 : 00] Or the things that they're being accused of and rebuked for, we haven't really done. That's fine. But these letters, as we read them, help us understand the kinds of issues that we will face as a church living between Jesus dying and rising and ascending and him coming again, which he's promised to do.

So our first stop is Pergamum. Just so you know, the one in the middle, we're not missing out for good, Thyatira. It's just for thematic reasons. We're looking at the one in Pergamum and the one in Sardis tonight.

Next week, we'll hone in on Thyatira in the middle. And Pergamum, it's on the sheets. We're looking at the church with nasty neighbors. If you just have a look with me at verse 12, he starts by addressing an angel of the church, and he does that for each of the seven churches.

And it reminds us that the health of any community of God's people, like ours, is a spiritual battle. There's a spiritual war going on as to whether we will keep going in Christ or whether we'll fall away. So Paul, sorry, Jesus, the risen Jesus, writes to the angel of the church in Pergamum. He says, write this to them. And then we get a description of Jesus Christ as he is today, as he is now, as he has been since he ascended to heaven.

[7 : 21] And the descriptions of Jesus that we get at the start of each letter are symbolic. They're not literally what he looks like, but they're designed to leave a deep impression of realities, of true things about him, to engage our emotions.

So in verse 12, to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, these are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. The sword of Jesus is sharp.

It's, in other words, he is effective. Everything that he seeks to do, he will accomplish. And it's double-edged, which is probably because it can cut both ways, either to judge and condemn or to save and heal and give life.

And when John first saw this sword with Jesus in chapter 1, it was in the mouth of Jesus. It was coming from his mouth, the sword, reminding us that it's by Jesus' words today that he is powerfully at work to save and give life or to judge and condemn.

We are never left unchanged when we hear Jesus' words. We handle the Bible with care. We come to church. There is a kind of a dangerous reality about hearing Jesus' words.

[8 : 38] We need them. They give life. They heal. But if we turn our hearts from them, they become a judgment against us. So this is Jesus as he is tonight, and he's with us right now, this evening.

And let's just, while we're thinking about him, put that picture together with the second picture we get of Jesus as he starts his letter to the church in Sardis over the page at the beginning of chapter 3.

He says, these are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. The seven spirits of God is picture language for the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God.

And the seven stars are the angels of the churches. We heard that in chapter 1. So picture Jesus tonight speaking words of power from his mouth, and in one hand, he holds the angels of the churches.

They're his messengers, and there's a picture there of how he knows exactly what's going on in every church, because they go out around the world and they come back to him.

[9 : 46] And in his other hand is the Holy Spirit who gives truth and life and renewal to the people. And we're seeing that for Jesus, it's word and spirit together as he works.

He speaks his word, and the Spirit takes up his word to do his work. So for Pergamum, if we go back there, chapter 2, verse 13, at first we get the recognition of what they have done.

Verse 13, Jesus says, I know where you live, where Satan has his throne. Now that is quite a description, isn't it?

If that's the only thing we know today about Pergamum, wow. I was reading recently a guide of what estate agents might say to you when you're looking around a flat or a house and what they might really mean.

So when they say it's an up-and-coming neighborhood, what they might mean is this place has missed out on everything for the last 30 years. But who knows, maybe one day soon that might change.

[10 : 44] It's up-and-coming. Or when they say of a property it's ideally located close to the motorway, what they mean is you'll need to wear earplugs every night. And if they say it's located in a lively area, they mean this is totally unsafe.

It's like living in the Wild West. Well, Jesus has no spin like that. He's just frank with the church, candid for their encouragement that he describes where they live as where Satan lives and as where Satan reigns.

Pergamum, what we know of it was that it was a very impressive city. It was prosperous, it was secure, and it was built on terraces up this mountainside. And it had great temples, it had an altar to Zeus, the kind of king of the gods on Mount Olympus in Greek religion.

It was also one of the first cities to fall for the kind of Roman emperor cult so that they would worship the emperor as a god. Big problem for Christians who were known as atheists in the first century because they would refuse to worship other gods.

They said there's only one god in heaven, the god of the Bible. And so perhaps it's because of this kind of worshipping of the emperor of Rome and of Zeus and other pagan gods that Jesus describes this city as where Satan rules because he is behind that enticing of people away from the truth and towards made-up gods.

[12 : 20] And confessing that Jesus is Lord in a place like that came at a terrible cost if we read on verse 13. Jesus says, I know where you live yet you remain true to my name.

You did not renounce your faith in me not even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness who was put to death in your city where Satan lives.

Imagine how we would be affected if that happened here in Glasgow. If a Christian in the west end of Glasgow was killed for their confession that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

And people approved of that. People thought that was the right thing to do. Imagine how destabilizing that might be for us. And Jesus commends this church because they had had one of their number martyred and they didn't give up.

And there's comfort in Jesus saying to them I know where you live. I know what that is like. And that's encouraging for any of us tonight who are thinking about the week ahead and we are under significant pressure where we will be going for being a Christian.

[13 : 31] Whether it's in your workplace or a sports team or it's your family. If you feel the heat if it's hard for you to say that you're a Christian how comforting to know that Jesus says I know where you live.

Yet you remain true to my name. That's the recognition. But then for this church comes the rebuke. After the recognition the rebuke verse 14 Nevertheless I have a few things against you.

And that is really striking isn't it? To think that you could be in a situation where there is extreme pressure that the heat has been turned up Christians are being killed and you withstand that and you're willing to stand up and still say I'm a Christian and then find that you're in really significant

serious spiritual danger for a different reason.

There's a danger from a different direction. So Jesus goes on There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So he's describing there a way that these Christians in Pergamum are being enticed attracted by a form of false teaching and it's drawing them away from being firmly rooted in the Bible in the scriptures.

[15 : 05] The false teaching encourages two things probably related things in the first century this idea of eating food sacrificed to idols so this kind of participation in idol worship and the other thing mentioned there is committing sexual immorality and because those were the kind of battles at that time an equivalent today would be any gospel message where it's clear to you that you need to have faith in Christ to see that Jesus is Lord but the message you hear is trust him but there's nothing really said about repentance about how you actually to put your trust in Jesus you have to turn from the direction you were going in away from God and turn back to God and no wonder that would be attractive to hear in a city with pagan temples and all kinds of merchant guilds and trade guilds that's what you had at the time so that for to do business to have a job to do working life in a city like Pergamum you would be part of a trade guild that would have a patron God so you might go to a business meeting and the first thing that happens is there's a sacrifice to Zeus or a song of worship to the emperor and as a Christian you would have to kind of withdraw from that to be exclusively faithful to the God of the Bible meant

I'm going to miss out socially when the feasts and festivals that our calendar runs around are things I can't join in with I'm missing out I'm going to miss out economically when the business meetings that I want to be at involve participation in idolatry and I'm going to miss out sexually I guess people might think because God says in his words sex is for faithful committed marriage one man one woman and there would be sexual intimacy and pleasure available elsewhere if you were worshipping idols there was kind of shrine prostitution and things like that in the first century and Jesus speaks into that and he says remember Balaam now what's going on there if you just look at what's said in the letter is probably that the bit there in verse 14 about how some of them hold to the teaching of Balaam is Jesus pointing them back to what happened to their ancestors in the book of Numbers in the Old Testament with Balaam and Balak so it's not actually in the first century that they are literally holding to the teaching of Balaam what they're holding to is the teaching in verse 15 where it says likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans so he's drawing a comparison between the false teaching some of them are believing the Nicolaitans verse 15 with what their ancestors believed and this story is an incredible story it's in Numbers 22 to 25 the Israelites have been rescued by God they've become a great nation and they've been led by Moses to the edge of the promised land they're on the plains of Moab and a nearby king Balak was worried about the Israelites so he hired a prophet Balaam and he paid him to go and curse the Israelites and Balaam went along with it and he went over and he went to sort of speak this curse over the nation of Israel from God and he found that all he could speak was blessing so he speaks these amazing words of blessing over the people he can't help himself because he can't get the living God to abandon his people God has made promises for these people and all he will do is bless them so that the plan fails so then Balaam changes tack and he goes back to Balak and he says send attractive women to be near the Israelites and the men will fall for it and they'll be seduced by these Moabite women and they will commit sexual immorality and then they'll join in with the idolatry and it works in Numbers 25 so the message of this interaction with Balaam is that you can trust that God will never abandon his people who he's promised to keep and be faithful to he's faithful to them but what you might find is the people might abandon God and leave his blessing by turning from him and Jesus is saying here in verse 14 that when you have false teaching in the church that encourages Christians to kind of mix their confession about Jesus with the worldliness all around us kind of living for the idols of our age it's kind of the same spirit it draws people it entices them away from God when we're too tolerant of our own worldliness when we're willing to say we're a Christian but we just live like everyone else

Jesus calls his people to be the salt of the earth to be deliciously distinctive to be the light of the world but when we just go along with the values of the world and we live for materialism alongside being a Christian or we live for the self instead of looking to serve others like Jesus did we're kind of worshipping Christ but we're participating in the idols of the age and the issue here in the church in

Pergamum is that that's being kind of supported and affirmed by teaching within the church just as today it wouldn't be difficult for you to find teaching on podcasts or in books or in churches that kind of affirms you going on with the spirit of the age that is kind of about faith in Jesus but not repentance towards him and it can mean that we might drift over time in our lives to finding the black and white teaching of Jesus his call to wholeheartedness following him to kind of finding that constraining instead of life giving the bible talks about how holding to

Jesus teaching gives you true freedom but maybe if we find that we're being enticed by the world we stop believing that and we start looking for churches and teaching where they affirm living for things in the world today so I've got this mate Daph who's a church minister and he's quite a big character and quite outspoken and he ended up on this holiday I don't know how he got it but there was this holiday to Israel to like see the sites where the bible events took place with a load of other ministers for free right so he went but he's away with these people and lots of them were ministers of churches where they don't hold to the authority of the bible but they're all on holiday together looking at like the holy land as it's called sometimes and so he didn't really have anything to say to these people like they have completely different ideas about the Christian life and ministry but that so I would have just been quiet but that never really stopped

[22 : 27] Daph from speaking he just speaks so he was lying in the dead sea floating with another couple of ministers who like lead liberal churches or cathedrals or something and he said to them you know one thing that I think must be really good about your job is that you never really have to do any evangelism do you because like we us evangelicals us bible believers we go out into the world and we talk to people about Jesus because we want them to be saved and then they become Christians and they join our churches but you don't have to do that do you because your churches are just full of people who started in our churches and then they've drifted from the bible so they join your churches and the remarkable thing about that was that the guys in the dead sea with him they didn't mind him saying that they said yeah that's kind of true our churches are full of ex evangelicals they just wanted a bit more wriggle room is what they say so we can drift we can be pulled away by the worldliness around us and if we've drifted like that or we're tolerating teaching like that the solution comes from

Jesus in verse 16 if you have a look repent therefore he's saying just turn back to God today turn afresh back to God verse 16 otherwise I will come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth and then after the rebuke comes the remedy if you look at verse 17 to the one who is victorious I will give some of the hidden manna I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it known only to the one who receives it we're going to look at these two letters at twice because we'll get to the next letter as well that there's a promise for those who are victorious and it might be that in both cases they are about the future and what comes if we keep going to the end till Jesus returns or calls us home but I wonder if these ones are actually about when it says the one who was victorious it's about repenting today and about what

Jesus offers us now today if we will repent see when Israel was in the wilderness before they got to the promised land the manna from heaven sustained them every day it was God's provision to keep them going till they got to the promised land and Jesus describes himself as the true bread that came down from heaven he is the manna and if we repent from our worldliness from filling up our desires with things in the world around us we will find that Jesus sustains us he is enough he will give us everything we need day by day in our walk with him so that we can keep going then his next picture is of a white stone that he will give to the one who overcomes with a new name written on it so in both these pictures you notice there is an intimacy with Jesus the manner he gives his faithful people is a hidden manner and the white stone has a name on it that he gives to his follower and no one else knows what the name is and again there are different ideas for this white stone but one idea of what this white stone might be is that it could be an amulet because in paganism all around at that time you would have amulets special stones that you'd carry with you that you would believe gave you spiritual protection and as these people are being called by Jesus to repent in a city that was prosperous and safe they the that's Pergamum and we move on now to Sardis Sardis is the church with a reputation Sardis before we get into the verses is a city that if there was one thing you knew about Sardis in the first century it was a city that historically had let its guard down at the heart of the city was an acropolis which I had to look up and is a citadel which I had to look up and a citadel is a city is a castle that's the head of a city so an acropolis is a citadel on a mountain side and this acropolis in Sardis was

incredibly safe or seen to be because on one side there was this really steep precipice a sheer drop so they guarded the side that was accessible and then the back side they didn't even need to guard because no one could get up then in the 7th century BC there was a Persian emperor Cyrus in the time of Daniel we read about him there and his army came and besieged Sardis and not a lot was happening for the first 14 days an army defending it and then one of the Persian soldiers Hiroeidas went for a walk around the city and he saw a soldier in Sardis and he dropped his helmet and it rolled down the mountain side and he went down and got it and climbed back up and he realized you can get up this so the next day he took some soldiers with him and they managed to scale up the mountain the precipice that no one thought you could climb attacked the city from the back where there was no defense and it was deeply vulnerable so it's ironic that the church in [28 : 47] Sardis may be guilty of the same problem in verse one we hear the wake up call to them chapter three verse one Jesus says I know your deeds you have a reputation for being alive but you are dead wake up strengthen what remains and is about to die for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God it's pretty striking isn't it in a spiritual health check it does not get much worse than being told you are dead it's as though Jesus is shaking them in verse two saying wake up there is still a possibility of clawing this back but he says strengthen what remains and is about to die the clock is ticking on this church and yet the church here has a good reputation so it may have been very busy with activity and all the while it is spiritually dying it's possible that we would get to a point as a church where we have we would have a good reputation so that we might get to a point where if you were to move to a different place to

Edinburgh or London or Inverness or Auckland or Melbourne and you say I used to live in Glasgow I went to this church St Silas church that people might say oh good I hear such great things about that church a very sound church a straight down the line church church with great music I've heard great things but but then that in our hearts we would spiritually have fallen asleep and that could happen when what other people think of us the reputation bit actually matters too much to us and stops us earnestly seeking to make sure that we're growing with God and kindling the fire in our hearts of love for God would Jesus be able to look in at your life and say that you're living the Christian life as an outward appearance but your heart isn't really in it your heart has drifted from him that's the kind of wake up call that this church gets so we've heard the wake up call then we get the warning in verse three remember therefore what you have received and heard hold it fast and repent but if you do not wake up

I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you now not everyone in the church is guilty of that and there is a reassurance in verse four the Lord Jesus says you have a few people who have not sold their clothes so there are some in the church who have stayed faithful and are spiritually awake and alive but the call to the church is repent turn back to God today so how do they spur themselves on to do that how do we if we need to repent spur ourselves on to that well after the wake up call and the warning we get the way back to life and it's to focus again on Jesus as we apply these letters to ourselves we have to look within at ourselves but as people sometimes say for every one look within take ten looks at him look at Jesus so here in verse four he says for those who have kept going he says they will walk with me dressed in white for they are worthy isn't that an extraordinary picture of a closeness to

Jesus just as we hear in Genesis chapter 2 of Adam walking with God in the garden of Eden Jesus holds out for us this wonderful picture of a future with him if we're faithful to him if we stay spiritually alive one day he's going to welcome us into his garden city and we'll walk with him he will walk alongside us honoring us in clothes that are white that's our future and then in verse five he says the one who is victorious will like them be dressed in white so we won't feel any shame whatever we've done will be completely clean in God's sight and it's surprising with the church in Sardis that there is no mention of persecution here several churches mentioned in these letters are having to endure persecution why isn't this church having to do that it was a city that had pagan temples it had a big

Jewish community which made it difficult in the first century to be a Christian because you'd be excommunicated for being a Christian so some writers wonder had the Christians in Sardis gone quiet about Jesus one reason you might do that is if you were worried about being excommunicated from the synagogue or having your name taken off the list of the trade guilds and so look at the promise from Jesus in verse five the one who is victorious will like them be dressed in white I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life but will acknowledge that name before

my father and his angels so the question to ask ourselves is where do we want to have a good reputation is it in our city where people might say we don't mind you being a Christian as long as long as you don't convert anyone else as long as you still keep in with our values or would we want a good reputation from other

[34 : 37] Christians who say oh that's a good church that's a sound church or could we resolve that what will really matter to us is our reputation in heaven where Jesus says that even if your story in this life is that you lost your reputation for him even if your name is being crossed off all kinds of lists because you follow Jesus he says I've got a book called the book of life and I've written your name in it and I'll never cross it out and if you acknowledge me in your city Sardis Glasgow I'll acknowledge you before my father and his angels let's pray together we praise you Lord Jesus for your word sharper than a double edged sword and we ask that you will reform and renew us under your word that you will send your spirit to enliven us to wake us up where we fallen asleep to expose for us where our works are lacking that you will help us to turn back to you afresh this evening that we might walk the

Christian life now acknowledging you before others give us we pray the hidden manner that we can feed on you and we thank you for your promise that you will one day acknowledge us before your heavenly father that we will walk with you in glory dressed in white preserve us we pray in Jesus name amen we're going to sing in response to God