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REVELATION 2: 12 – 17

PERGAMUM – FAITHFUL, BUT COMPROMISING

On the 11th of November we celebrate ‘Remembrance Day’ in Canada. We remember those who gave their lives to protect and safeguard our freedoms. Freedom is extremely precious. Many people in this world do not enjoy the basic freedoms we are used to in our country. And so, yes, we remember those sacrifices with gratitude.

But we cannot leave it at that. If we are thankful for freedom, we also have a responsibility as to what we do with this freedom; how we use it. This shows how we value the sacrifices that were made. I can say that I am thankful for freedom, but what does that mean when I turn around and abuse it, or squander it?

This leads of course, to the question: ‘what is freedom?’ And as it turns out, freedom does not mean the same for everybody. It all depends on how you look at life, what you value in life, what your priorities are in life, etc.

You get a better understanding of this when you have the opportunity to talk about these things with Christian believers from countries where people, often Christians, do not enjoy many of the freedoms we have here: freedom of religion; freedom of speech; freedom of education, and things like that.

So we ask again: what is freedom? The modern state of Israel built the infamous wall between them and the Palestinian territories to keep suicide-bombers out. That sounds reasonable, does it not? But then Palestinian Christians tell us: This wall restricts our freedom to visit family or the freedom of farmers to go their fields.

And it gets even more confusing when the so-called freedom-fighters in Syria are the ones that are destroying the freedom of Christian believers in that country.

At the same time, these various situations help us understand what true freedom is all about for God's people. Regardless of the circumstances the church finds itself in, our true freedom is our freedom in Jesus Christ. He sets us free from sin and evil. This is the freedom the church must hold and proclaim.

For Christians then, whether we enjoy political freedom or suffer persecution, the question is: what do we do with this freedom in Christ? Do we squander it? Do we compromise it? Or do we hold on to it?

Here is the paradox: Holding on to your freedom in Jesus Christ may take away your freedom in our secular society, or the other way round. So the question we have to ask ourselves is: are you going to compromise your freedom in Jesus Christ, to protect your freedom in this world?

This was the question the church at Pergamum was confronted with.

When we travel from Smyrna to Pergamum, we go about 70 km slightly to the north east in present-day Turkey. In the time of the Romans, Pergamum was a beautiful city, spectacularly located on the top and slopes of a high hill. It was also a powerful city. The Romans made it the capital of the province of Asia. It was the residence of the Roman governor, and the administrative and judicial centre of the province.

Pergamum was not so much a trading centre, like Ephesus and Smyrna, where the addressees of the previous messages lived, but more of a cultural centre, where the arts and sciences were flourishing. It also had a famous library. With all this came a great variety of religious influences. While emperor worship was significant, the top of the hill the city was built on had

many temples for the worship of various Eastern and Western pagan gods and goddesses, too.

It is this idolatrous background of a mix of pagan religious power, political power, and cultural power that made Pergamum a dangerous place to live for the local Christian church. It was dangerous because of persecution. But also because of the many temptations. And the exalted Christ knows this. *I know where you dwell, he says, where Satan's throne is.*

That sounds scary. The word “throne” occurs forty-seven times in the Book of Revelation. And the vast majority of these references to a ‘throne’ are about God’s throne. It is mentioned for the first time in Rev. 1:6, and we get a lively description of the throne of God in Rev. 4. But there are also a few rival thrones.

This political imagery is important because it helps us to identify, now already, what will turn out to be one of the major conflicts in Revelation. Who sits on the throne? Who rules the world, the universe? Who is in control?

We know “Satan” as God’s fierce enemy. And God’s people need to know this. His name is mentioned five times in these messages. Followed by the Beast and Babylon – symbolic figures we will come across later on in the Book – Satan is the main rival contender. He competes for people’s loyalty to him. As God’s enemy he is actively opposing God’s rule and authority, in everything.

He does so by establishing his own counter-kingdom. He sets up his throne as the counter-part to God’s throne, claiming and proclaiming that he rules; that he is in control. And the church of Jesus Christ in Pergamum is facing the frightening reality that it is located in the same city that is the heart of this counter-kingdom.

Here is the church, and Satan’s headquarters is just around the corner, so to speak.

But this is not just about Pergamum. Remember that in these seven messages Jesus addresses the whole church, the universal church. So, also when Christ gives this scary picture to Pergamum, he is speaking to us. Until Jesus Christ will return in glory, until the coming of the new heaven and the new earth, God’s holy throne is found above, in heaven while Satan’s counterfeit

throne is found below, here on earth, in this world! Even after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, it is still here.

In other words, Christ says – not just to Pergamum, but to us as well – Never forget that today you, the church, are located where Satan has his throne. Indeed, we live in the midst of this hostile counter-kingdom, exposed to its hostilities.

And Christ knows this. *I know where you live*, he says to his church throughout the world in the 21st century. *You live where Satan's throne is*. "I know the great risks you are taking by being faithful to me".

"But do not be afraid. You live under the protective power of my sword. You live under the authority of the Word from my mouth."

Do not be afraid – not even if the sword of persecution kills faithful witnesses, like our brother Antipas who was killed in Pergamum.

That is why Christ presents himself here as the one *who has the sharp, two-edged sword*. The sword is a weapon to defend yourself and to attack your enemies. The picture shows that Jesus is at war – not only with all these different religions and powers in Pergamum, but with the satanic power behind all these – his arch-enemy Satan, the Devil himself! This is the same enemy you and I are facing every day.

O sure, Satan was defeated when Jesus died and rose again. But now our Saviour is getting ready to complete the job. He is getting ready for the final act with the sword of his mouth. He is coming to rule and judge with his Word and Spirit. And this final phase of history is not a time for compromise.

And yet, despite the threatening circumstances, although they live where Satan rules, the exalted Christ has good things to say about his church in Pergamum. *You hold fast my name*, he says. The believers in Pergamum remained true to their faith in Jesus. And Christ praises them for this loyalty, this faithfulness.

Even when brother Antipas was killed, my faithful witness – you did not deny your faith in me, he says. This murder must have been a shock for the congregation. But they did not forsake Jesus. They did not give up their faith. We

do not know anything about Antipas, other than that he was not ashamed to confess Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour. He refused to compromise his faith, and he did not beat about the bush when it came to that. For this he paid with his life.

What do we do when confessing Jesus as Saviour is getting one of us into trouble? Perhaps we think: “he should have kept his mouth shut. Now he gets all of us in trouble. Who is going to be next?”

But despite the dangerous and critical circumstances in Pergamum, the congregation has been persistently faithful. The members of the church remained true to the only name by which we can be saved. For they know: No other religion or power in the world can save, but Jesus alone; the Son of God, who died on the cross and rose again – he alone is the Saviour of the world.

This is a great and encouraging testimony from the exalted Christ about his people in Pergamum. You would have loved to be part of such a strong and faithful community. However, not everyone is so uncompromising.

Christ knows more. He also knows that they were making some serious mistakes in the church at Pergamum. They neglected discipline. There were some false teachers around that seriously mutilated the gospel. And they were big time promoters of compromise with the contemporary culture. In Ephesus they did not want to have anything to do with folks like that. But in Pergamum the church failed to reject and get rid of these people.

But, says Christ, I have a few things against you. You have some among you, who hold on to other teachings, other ideas. Their teachings, their ideas compromise the truth of the Scriptures. They compromise the radical nature of total dedication of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some church-members had participated in pagan festivals, celebrations, or other social activities. But in those days that came unavoidably with idol-worship. Some may have been involved even in the immoral practices that often characterized such occasions. Others were perhaps simply enticed by the contemporary easy-going and pleasure-seeking lifestyle.

“And in your church you don’t do anything about it,” says Christ. “Believers in Pergamum, this I have against you,” he says, “that you allow these people in your congregation.”

You have some there, who hold the teaching of Balaam. Now this Balaam was not a real teacher in Pergamum. Balaam was some sort of magician in the Old Testament. Here Balaam is mentioned as a model, to illustrate what they were dealing with in Pergamum and what the possible consequences could be.

What the church in Pergamum was also facing was the influence of *those who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans!* We have met them before. They were also mentioned in the message to the church in Ephesus. You may remember that the Ephesians hated their practices and so did Christ. Then you will understand why Christ is so indignant here. Believe it or not, the congregation in Pergamum was okay with having those Nicolaitans around in the church.

What do we know about this group? Not much. But we do know they promoted the idea of compromise with the pagan world in which they were living, the contemporary culture of their days. Christians should get rid of a suspicious and antagonistic attitude towards the pagan or secular society in which they live, they suggested. If you would like to participate in some of the social activities of your pagan neighbours or friends – and those were usually also religious activities – go ahead, they said! It is not a big deal.

The boundaries between the church and the world are not that important. You do not have to give up being a Christian, but you can combine your Christian faith with some of the values and beliefs of the anti-Christian culture. Some of those things are not all that bad. Not everything is always black or white.

Do not be a stickler. It makes your life much easier and safer in this world. Your pagan neighbours are actually going to appreciate you more. And it is more fun, too.

After all, you live and work here, in this world! You go to school, you have a job, you have a profession, or you run a business. That means that you have to get along and you will have to participate in the lifestyle, and sometimes

even in the religious rituals, of your colleagues and business partners. In those days, this implied eating food sacrificed to idols and joining in sexually immoral entertainment.

Compromising your faith in this way may not seem too big of a deal.

But according to Christ this is serious business. How serious? “Well,” he says, “look at the story of Balaam and at his teaching.” We can find it in Numbers 22 – 25.

Balak, king of Moab wanted to destroy the people of Israel. But he figured that military violence would not work. The Israelites had just defeated some powerful enemies. And so he summoned Balaam, a well-known diviner, and paid him big bucks to lay a curse on God’s people. We know that this did not work either. Then Balaam came up with another plan. According to Numbers 31:16 he gave Balak the advice that led to what we see happen in Numbers 25:1, 2. Men of Israel enjoyed sex with Moabite women. These women in turn invited them to attend sacrifices to their gods and worship those gods.

No, these Israelites were not giving up worshipping the Lord, the God of Israel. But they compromised. At least that is what they were thinking. It makes sense, does it not? You can fight the enemy, but you can also try to get along as good neighbours. Then you can even enjoy the pleasures the pagans are offering.

And Balaam’s strategy was successful. God’s people compromised their trust in God alone, by turning to false gods. Why not both? And the feasts they were invited to, were a blast, with lots of food, sacrificed to idols and lots of beautiful Moabite girls. They really enjoyed themselves. But Balaam knew very well that in the end this would completely ruin God’s people.

Well, this is what is happening in Pergamum, says Christ. In line with Balaam’s suggestions, the Nicolaitans among you encourage people to cross the boundaries between the church and the world. They may claim that you do not leave your Christian identity behind when you are blending your Christian faith with whatever false teaching, worldly lifestyle, or ungodliness you are confronted with, as long as it looks interesting or attractive. But in the end it is all just disobeying God!

Now, it is important to note that not the whole congregation in Pergamum was infected by this. Not everybody in the church acted this way. But the problem was that the church did not resist the members that did. They did not take any action. They did not put them under discipline. They just let them carry on. That is why Jesus Christ was holding the congregation as a whole responsible.

Perhaps they were putting more emphasis on their own individual salvation, at the expense of the well-being and purity of the church as a whole. This is actually an even more urgent issue for us today, than it was in the time of the Apostles.

We know that the church is important, but in our post-modern individualistic mindset it is often first of all about my personal salvation, my own relationship with God and Jesus Christ. With such thinking the church is there for my benefit. She becomes my personal SSP (Spiritual Service Provider).

The result is that we feel less responsible for the choices others in the church are making, and for the effect it has on the purity of the church. You do things differently than I do. I would never do what you do. You would not feel comfortable doing what I do. But we both believe in Jesus as the Saviour, so we will all be fine.

But Christ says: “No – you are not fine. We are talking about my church. And about the purity of my church, my bride!”

In Pergamum some argued: “if we refuse to participate in those pagan festivals, we effectively withdraw ourselves from all social life in this city. We could lose our job. It could ruin our business. It would make me a social outcast.”

And so these Nicolaitans said: “Don’t worry about it. Attend those feasts, even if they are dedicated to pagan gods. Enjoy yourself, as long as you keep in mind that such an idol is nothing.”

But the church in Pergamum underestimated the dangers of a compromising attitude towards the world. When you cross those boundaries and you accommodate the values and beliefs of the antichristian culture, your commitment to the Holy God is in danger. Even if there are only some in the

church who promote this compromise with the world – the pagan world of Pergamum or the secular world today – it is unacceptable!

And thus, the exalted Christ issues this urgent call: *Therefore, repent*. Break with this! Turn around! He does not say this only to those who had compromised their faith. He also addresses the ones who would not make compromises themselves, but who accept these Nicolaitans, and allow this to go on. They are also guilty of compromise.

There is a lot at stake here. For ‘if you do not repent’, he adds, *I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth*. Remember what Jesus had said before: “I am coming soon. The time is near.” Jesus Christ himself is coming to take action against those who persist in worldly practices and so compromise their Christian life, because of friendship with the world.

And he will do so with “the sword of his mouth”, that is his holy Word. “I will come to judge,” he says. “I will expose their sins and publicly declare them guilty, worthy of condemnation, because their hearts were not fully dedicated to me. They gave up the freedom I gave them, for the so-called freedom the world offers”.

You may start to wonder now: Is the second coming of Jesus not going to be a joyful event then, something to look forward to? That depends. The world in the final phase of history is a warzone. And Jesus is coming as Judge. He will use his sword to separate those who follow him from those who refuse to do that. He comes to fight, he says. The battle lines are drawn.

But the most important question is: where are you in this picture? Those who compromise their faith, those who assimilate to the modern world, to the expectations of the modern culture – they will find themselves on the wrong side of the battle, unless they repent. So, what do you do? Join the Winner! Jesus Christ your King. This is not the time for compromise.

Here is a strong warning for us, the church today. What do we do with the gospel of Jesus Christ today? How do we live it in today’s world?

The true gospel of Jesus and his sacrifice for all our sins is offensive to many people in our modern world. We can try to sugar-coat it to avoid controversy and make it more acceptable. We can try to compromise the gospel, by

taking the offensive parts out. Perhaps we hope in this way to find friendship with the world. And who knows – we might even be able to be a positive influence in the world.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with trying to be a positive influence in the world, but consider the price you might have to pay for this.

Think of what John wrote in 1 John 2:15: *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*

And James issues this warning (James 4:4): *Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?*

Those who pursue such friendship with the world, he calls “adulterous people”.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is offensive. We better get used to it. As Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:12: *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

Compromising the gospel of salvation in the hope to win friends, to make it easier to influence people, to avoid controversy and escape hostility – all these things make the message of the church meaningless and leave the church powerless.

Jesus Christ does not call us as his church to be one of the many subcultures in this world. He wants us to present what we stand for as a clear counterculture. This may trigger controversy, hatred, scorn, or ridicule from the world. But that is to be expected and should not surprise us, says the Bible.

Here is the problem. If we live our Christian lives in such a compromising way that it is difficult to distinguish it from the lives of others who do not follow Jesus Christ, then the church will not attract persecution. But it will also not gain any respect, and worse, it will make the gospel irrelevant.

However, if we remain true to the name of Jesus Christ, if we preach the true gospel, if we live the Christian life without watering down or compromising the biblical message, we may trigger hatred, suffering or persecution. We might also attract the attention of some who want to follow Christ. But the most important thing is that we praise, honour, and glorify God.

But the warning is not the end. In this message the exalted Christ has another promise for his faithful church, the church that listens with an open heart to the Word of the Holy Spirit.

To the one who conquers... if you have repented and have resisted the temptation to compromise your Christian faith, to blend it with some attractive false teaching, if you have remained true to the name of Jesus Christ – here is your promise. Actually, it's a double promise this time. Christ promises two things.

First, he says, *I will give some of the hidden manna*. After Balaam and Balak we have here another reference to the Old Testament. You may remember how God fed his people in the wilderness with the manna that fell from heaven (Exodus 16). By God's grace Israel's food supply was taken care of during the journey toward the Promised Land – every day again.

In the same way God promises to feed his faithful church with the bread from heaven. This manna is Jesus Christ himself. In John 6 we read that Jesus says about himself: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." As the journey continues through this world where Satan has his throne, our Saviour sustains us with his grace and mercy, every day, until he will appear in glory and usher in the new heaven and the new earth.

Stay the course. Reject everything that will lead you astray, that will slow you down or that will make you lose your sense of direction. "I will take care of you," says Jesus.

All this is 'hidden' for the world. But for those who are in Jesus it is very real and full of comfort and encouragement.

But there is more: *I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone*. 'White' is always a symbol of purity, holiness and 'stone' is durable. Also, in the Greek courts a 'white stone' was given to mark someone as innocent and free.

In other words, here your Saviour says to you with the symbolic image of this "white stone with a new name": if you remain faithful to my name, I will give you the assurance of your imperishable freedom from sin and guilt.

I am making everything new, also your name. By God's grace you will be given a new identity in Jesus Christ. You belong to him. It is written in stone, so that it cannot be undone or deleted, ever!

And no one will know your new name. Only you know the intimate relationship you have with your Saviour. He knows you as no one else knows you.

This white stone with your new name is your assurance, so to speak, that he will welcome you into the perfect communion with him in his eternal kingdom of peace.

Just do not compromise your faith and your faithfulness.

3. Sometimes Christians make a contrast between defending and promoting purity of doctrine, rejecting false teaching and applying discipline on the one hand, and being a church where love and social compassion are in the centre of everything we do. It is often seen as traditional, conservative versus contemporary and outreach-minded. Is it correct to contrast those things? Explain why or why not. Can you appeal to this letter to Ephesus for this?
4. Seven times we read in Revelation that John was *in the Spirit* and that he saw and heard things *in the Spirit*. What do you think it means “to be in the Spirit”? Discuss the question whether God might use the same experience today to communicate with people.

Chapter 4 – Revelation 2:8-11

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Smyrna Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. In Smyrna, the Christians were facing severe persecution. This is a significant aspect of the Christian life throughout history, and is still the case in many parts of the world. What do you think is the secret of believers who remain steadfast and strong in their faith under serious threats? Think of the story of Polycarp.
3. Have you ever experienced negative reactions to your Christian faith and/or Christian life? How did you or would you handle that and deal with it? What makes it hard not to compromise your faith?
4. In the political and economic situations we find ourselves in, here in North America, we enjoy much prosperity, as well as freedom to worship and serve the Lord. Does the call of Christ: *Be faithful unto death...* mean anything for us? Can we do anything with it today?

Chapter 5 – Revelation 2:12-17

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Pergamum Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.

2. Satan is described as sitting on a throne. He claims to rule and to be in control, opposing God's rule and authority. He wants us to be loyal to him. How does he do this in the world today? And what does he do to back up his claim? What does Christ's ascension into heaven teach us about his claim?
3. Where else in the New Testament do you find warnings against a compromising attitude towards the world? Why is the purity of the church, when it comes to doctrine and Christian life, also important for each of you personally?
4. Where else in the New Testament do you find a reference to a *two-edged sword*? How does this verse help you understand what Christ is saying here in the verses 12 and 16 to the believers in Pergamum and to believers today?

Chapter 6 – Revelation 2:18-29

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Thyatira Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. What does it look like today, in our time, to face the dilemma: if I want my business to be successful I should actually make decisions and do things that meet the requirements or expectations of our culture, but may be contrary to God's Word. How do you handle such situations? Does the New Testament have anything to say about this?
3. Do we still have prophets or prophetesses today through whom God gives us new revelations? If someone claims this, should we believe him or her? Why or why not?
4. Read Acts 5:1-11. Why were Ananias and Sapphira killed in the church in Jerusalem? And what was God's intention by doing this? How should we apply this today?

Chapter 7 – Revelation 3:1-6

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Sardis Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the