



Jesus' Appraisal

The Letter to Pergamum

April 11, 2021

SONG #1

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 22:22-29

Here's the story I'll tell my friends when they come to worship,
and punctuate it with Hallelujahs:

Shout Hallelujah, you God-worshippers;
give glory, you sons of Jacob;
adore him, you daughters of Israel.

He has never let you down,
never looked the other way
when you were being kicked around.
He has never wandered off to do his own thing;
he has been right there, listening.

Here in this great gathering for worship
I have discovered this praise-life.
And I'll do what I promised right here
in front of the God-worshippers.

Down-and-outers sit at God's table
and eat their fill.
Everyone on the hunt for God
is here, praising him.
"Live it up, from head to toe.
Don't ever quit!"

From the four corners of the earth
people are coming to their senses,
are running back to God.
Long-lost families
are falling on their faces before him.

God has taken charge;
from now on, he has the last word.

All the power-mongers are before him
—worshiping!
All the poor and powerless, too
—worshiping!
Along with those who never got it together
—worshiping!

SONG #2

PRE-SERMON READING | Revelation 2:12-17

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

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

But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and 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 the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

PERGAMUM | Cultural Background

to the angel of the church in Pergamum...where Satan's throne is. (2:12-13)

Our third letter from Jesus to his church is read to a people living in treacherous conditions. We all imagine the place where Satan sits enthroned as a place of debauchery and sleaze, don't we? A dark place, oozing with evils. Yet Pergamum, by all accounts, was a magnificent city. The crown of a civilized society, a palace of healing, a bastion of law and order.

“Beyond all other cities in Asia Minor,” contends archeologist Sir William Ramsey, “gives the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority...”¹ And that description is key to understanding the context of Pergamum—royalty, and authority. The question, though, is, whose?

Built upon a cone-like hill overlooking the valley of the River Caicus, one could easily see the Mediterranean Sea some fifteen miles away. It's no wonder that Pergamum could trace its lineage to prehistoric times. It was, says Willam Barclay, “historically...the greatest city of Asia,”² for at the time of Jesus' address, Pergamum had been a capital city in some form or fashion for nearly 400 years. First of the Attalids and then of Rome, since the rulers who sat atop the conical city gave the Roman authorities what would be known as the province of Asia.

The city's “name in Greek (*Pergamon*) means ‘citadel.’”³ This towering stronghold over time became known as “the finest flower of Hellenic civilization,” for it boasted “a library of more than 200,000 volumes.” Still, “the most spectacular aspect of this remarkable city was the upper terrace of the [bastion] with its sacred and royal buildings...”

Here sat “the great altar of Zeus,” which stood some forty-plus feet tall and rested near the mountain's peak. You can still find the reconstructed remains of the throne of Zeus in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. At the base of this throne was a famous frieze (a band of sculpted decoration) which “depicts the gods of Greece in victorious combat against the giants of earth, alongside the victory of Attalus I (the first ruler in Asia) over the [barbarian] Galatians.” In other words, here at Pergamum is where civilization began!

Pergamum was also “a center of worship for the four most important pagan cults of the day—Zeus, Athene, Dionysos, and Asklepios.”

Asklepios was the god of healing, and his temple, the closest thing to a hospital in ancient times. What is important to note is that Asklepios' name was often proclaimed with the designation “Soter” or “Savior.” He drew people from across the province seeking his salvation. Asklepios was always represented as holding a staff with a serpent or simply as a serpent-wrapped rod.

¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 96.

² Ibid.

³The following quotes in this section are referenced from Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, 78-80.

Beyond the birthplace of civilization, intellectual life over primitive life, and the home to the healer (Savior) of humanity, Pergamum was also the official center in Asia for the imperial cult of Rome. The seat of emperor worship, where divinity and humanity become one, where the authority and power to make the world in our image found its force and face.

“It was the first city of Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of *a living ruler...*’the divine Augustus...” Venerating past leaders as god-like was not uncommon, but to proclaim as sitting human ruler as divine and divinely appointed was something new. Not only was Pergamum the first to build such a temple, the city actually acquired the title “*neokoros*” or “*temple warden.*” Pergamum did not only include the divination and worship of political power, it enforced it! “Of all the seven cities,” argues commentator Robert Mounce, “Pergamum was the one in which the church was most liable to clash with” literally everything that made Pergamum, Pergamum. For it was here “that Satan had established his official seat or chair of state.”

Pergamum was not a city of sleaze and filth and chaos. It was the crown of a civilized society, a palace of healing, a bastion of law and order. And that’s the tricky part. The modernization of this ancient place, coupled with an integrated and holistic vision for a healthy and whole life of religion and politics, and economics, played on every human’s aspiration. Power and authority were evident and evidently working for the prospering of the entire province—participation in the power structures and systems of authority, a matter of common sense and societal normality. It was a city where the seen and the unseen were united, but to what and whose end?

WHO JESUS IS (Person) | v. 12

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. (2:12)

We’ve noticed that after Jesus acknowledges the human and divine relationship with his church, he always “introduces himself with a description from [chapter 1’s] vision **that most suits the situation of [that specific faith family]**.”⁴ No church represents Jesus fully, yet every church is represented by Jesus perfectly for their time and place.

To the church of Pergamum, Jesus is the One “who has the sharp two-edged sword.” The reference links back to the vision of chapter 1, verse 16, which depicts Jesus holding the seven stars (the unseen life of the churches) in his right hand, and “from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword...”

The sword in the mouth has two angles of play in the first century. In the seat of both divine and human rule and authority (the throne of Satan and the capital of the Roman province), the sword represented both the literal and figurative power and means of life and death for its citizens. He who wielded the sword was in the power seat. In opposition to what is seen, Jesus is actually the one ruling, with authority over all matters of life and death. A comforting reality for those in the Pergamum context.

The sword of the mouth also refers to the means of God’s healing, the power of God, and God’s words or Word to bring into reality his purposes. Several passages of Isaiah help us see this. These messianic texts describe the time when God’s anointed would rescue, redeem, and rule are found in Isaiah 11, 49, and 27. Let’s quickly look at each.

Isaiah 11:3-4 comes on the heels of the description of Jesse's shoot upon whom the Holy Spirit rests. This chosen One from whom a new world emerges is described this way,

And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness, he shall judge the poor, and decided with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with **the rod of his mouth**, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

(Is. 11:3-4)

The rod of the mouth, a tool/weapon used to exact equitable, compassionate, righteous judgment on those most vulnerable and exposed to the ills and evils of this world. An action that will bring peace, as the following verses depict wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, calves and lions, cows and bears as grazing together in perfect harmony.

⁴ G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a commentary on the Greek text*, 239.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

(Is. 11:6-7)

What comes from the mouth of God's anointed brings justice and peace. The second passage is Isaiah 49:1-9, 25-26, which is a promise of redemption—both justice and rescue, judgment and salvation—for the world. Listen to what the one with a sharp sword as a mouth does.

*Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.*

***He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away.***

*And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God."*

*And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him—for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength—he says:*

*"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel, I will make you as **a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.**"*

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers:

"Kings shall see and arise; princes and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

*Thus says the Lord: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and **give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'**" (v. 1-9)*

*For thus says the LORD: "Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be **rescued**, for **I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children.** I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD **your Savior**, and your Redeemer, **the Mighty One** of Jacob." (v. 25-26)*

This is what the one with the sword in his mouth does; he rescues, he heals, he judges and rules and frees. How? By overcoming the true enemy and adversary:

*In that day, the day of redemption, says Isaiah, the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the **fleeing serpent**, Leviathan the **twisting serpent**, and he will slay **the dragon** that is in the sea.*

(Is. 27:1)

By describing himself as the one “who has the sharp two-edged sword,” Jesus is saying that he is the One who heals and saves, not Asklepios (or any modern technological or medical discovery). He is the One who judges, not Rome or Augustus (or any political party, social movement, or economic system). He is the one who rescues humanity from itself, not Zeus or Grecian intellect (not religion or knowledge). He is the one—as we’ve seen throughout the Revelation—that has the true power and authority over life and death and life forever.

The amazing thing is that salvation, rule, and authority are all exercised not with violence but with a Word. Eugene Peterson reminds us that,

The writer of Hebrews told us that the ‘*word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*’ (Heb. 4:12). In a similar way St. John uses the metaphor of the sword to demonstrate **what takes place when Christ speaks**.

These words conquer. Christ’s words are not limp. They cut through willful resistance [as Is. 27 depicts], **divide good from evil** [as Is. 11 describes], **overcome rebellion, and establish righteousness** [right relationship, a covenant as Isaiah 49 illustrates—a new name as Jesus will soon imagine].⁵

To a people overwhelmed by the forces of opposition, Jesus is the One who fights for them, “contends against those who contend against them.” The One who parses out what is good and evil, who rescues, saves, and rules, for only the one who truly reigns, who is truly in authority can wield the sword of life and death. No matter what is seen, he who holds power over the unseen is actually on the throne.

⁵ Peterson, 37-38.

ENCOURAGEMENT | v. 13

'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. (2:13)

Upon this city-on-a-hill, in the place where both believers and their ultimate adversary shared the same locality, lived a faith family who remained faithful to the name—**the character of life as well as confession and practices—of Jesus**. Despite the apparent adverse conditions, “They had not denied their faith by yielding to the pressure to burn incense to the emperor and declaring ‘Caeser is Lord.’” Nor had they bowed at the feet of Hellenistic intellectual and cultural triumph over humanity, nor sought the divine and mystical serpent Savior to heal them. They had held fast to Jesus, even when it cost one of their own his life.

Notice what Antipas is called in verse 13, “my faithful witness.” It is the same title given to Jesus in chapter 1 verse 5, “...*Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.*” In his holding fast to the character, confession, and practices of Jesus, Antipas is called a partner in the Witness and Work of Jesus.

Partnering as witnesses in the continuous work of Jesus alive, even in the least favorable context, is what the faith family of Pergamum is doing right. In their life together, they are witnessing (speaking and living out) the day of redemption and making of peace which Isaiah described.

Speaking the name and living in step with Jesus' character and practices amid whatever context we find ourselves is how we too partner with Jesus in his Witness and Work. Not by running from the place where Satan lives, but holding fast to the character, confession, and practices of Jesus, who is the one who yields the sword of royalty and authority right where we are (ruler of kings on earth), even if it is costly to do so.

The question we should ask ourselves Christ City Church is, “Are we holding fast to the name—character, practices, and confession—of Jesus”?

ADMONISHMENT | v. 14-16

But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (2:14-15)

It is difficult to imagine people holding fast, standing firm, amid so much overt evil force, could ever be in danger of losing all they've stood for simply by lack of discernment of what's going on within their community. What Jesus has against them (the 'few things,' being a few people) is not some new form of evil, unique to their time and place. Ephesus and Thyatira's churches are up against the same issue. No, the problem is not uncommon, and neither is there misstep. Rather than confronting the co-mingling of "ways" within their own family, the syncretism of life with Jesus and life as a Pergamumian, as the Ephesians did—albeit without love—they simply ignore or are unaware of the subtle seduction occurring in their midst—and the motivation behind the siren voices.

The reference to 'Balaam, who taught Balak,' tells us what is going on amongst the Pergamum faithful. You can find the story in [Numbers 22-25](#) and [31](#). It takes place as God's people were making the turn from forty years of wilderness wanderings towards the promised land. The story is quite incredible and includes a talking donkey and sword-wielding angel, along with a king (Balak) and diviner of sorts (Balaam).

The story goes that as God's people made their way towards the land God had set aside for them to dwell in, a land in which they were meant to prosper for the blessing of the entire world, a part of that blessing was overcoming kingdoms in opposition to God's kingdom⁶. One of those oppositional kingdoms was governed by Balak, king of Moab. When he saw the Israelites marching through his territory, he was worried he'd end up like the kings before him, dethroned. He knew he something was at work beyond what could be seen with this company of former slaves, so he called upon Balaam, a prophet for hire. Balak offered Balam honor and wealth and whatever else his kingdom could offer if he would curse the Israelites and keep them from seizing his throne of power and authority. Balaam, for all his avarice, nevertheless could not say anything the LORD God had not told him to say regarding Israel. Ironically enough, this man often spoke with God and recognized his place under God's authority. Three times he is paid to curse, and three times he blesses; not from his heart but because he was subject to God's words, not Balak's desires or even his own, but the One who was truly on the throne. Balaam's final "blessing" ended up being a curse against Balak's kingdom and his allies, and so "Balaam rose and went back to his place. And Balak also went his way." (Num. 24:25).

But that's not the end of the story. Israel ended up making Balak's kingdom their place of dwelling, just as Balaam predicted, yet, instead of blessing the land and the people by removing the signs, practices, and people keeping the old way alive, several joined in with them! But not because the Moabites overcame them with force, but because they seduced them. Literally, they subtly preyed upon the Israelites aspirations for a whole and prosperous life and invited them into their way of getting that life. It didn't hurt that the Moabite

⁶ If you want to know more about that, see Michael Heiser's *"The Unseen Realm: rediscovering the supernatural worldview of the Bible,"* or [let's grab coffee!](#)

way also included an overindulgence in fulfilling the flesh's desires—getting what you want by the means you want to get it!

The plan was wickedly genius! If Balak's Moabites couldn't defeat the Israelites straight on, and his diviner could not overpower the Spirit watching over and going before them, then these enemies of God would get God's people to entrap themselves! And listen, the scriptures tell us that this was indeed a plan and not just a circumstance of human nature. Numbers 31 tells us that it was "upon Balaam's advice" that the leadership of Moab (Balak) figured out how to cause "the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD" and thus provoke the consequences of their own rebellion. In this case, a plague that came among the congregation of the LORD.

The opposition planned to get the people on the wrong side of their God. Why? Because the opposition knew they could not touch them in their own power and authority.

Now here, once again on the enemy's territory, the people of God were threatening to overcome, and the enemy put an old plan back into action. **Get a few to mix-together and mix up the way to life, and the many will suffer, and the movement/takeover/reclamation/restoration will be stopped.** Unless the Pergamum followers of Jesus call out the compromise and call back into the way they've held so fast, then many will end up on the wrong side of the kingdom skirmish:

Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. (2:16)

It's important to point out again, as William Barclay does,

It is the word of the risen Christ that he will make war [against] them. We must note that he did not say: 'I will go to war with you'; he said 'I will go to war with them.' His wrath was directed not against the whole Church but against those who were seducing it. For those who were led astray, he had nothing but pity.

In the word of Christ, there is conviction of sin; in it, we are confronted with the truth and thereby with our own failure to obey it. In the word of Christ, there is an invitation to God; it convicts people of sin and invites them back to the love of God. In the word of Christ, there is assurance of salvation; it convicts people of sin, it leads them to the cross and it assures them that there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. [In the word of Christ, there is parsing of good and evil, what is true, good, and beautiful, and what is corrupt, dead, in decay]. The conquest of Christ is his power to win men and women to the love of God [, and to remove from the world all that has abandoned God's love for something else.]⁷

Balaam's advice, which some among the church of Pergamum are following via the forces visibly and invisibly ruling the city, was simply that what you want and what the city/world wants is the same thing, so why not work together for it! We are not asking you to abandon Jesus, just inviting you to get what you want how you want

⁷ Barclay, 103-104.

to do it. God wouldn't deny you the very thing he promised you, and here it is, right before you, take it, it's yours! No need to make such a fuss about the way; when we are all trying to get to the same place.

This same lie is what the enemy continues to speak and tempt us with. The problem is, getting what we want how we want to get it eventually proves where our loyalty lies, the master whom we love and the one who we hate. Eventually, we find ourselves on the side of the kingdom struggle we never wanted to be.

We get too caught up in the back half of v. 14 and the reference to literal idol worship. But that is a reference to the story in Numbers and not to the Nicolaitans' actions. What we know about his group is that they wanted everything Jesus offered; they were insiders, believers, people of faith. Yet, they saw no issue with getting the life Jesus provided through whatever means were at their disposal. Following to their own desires and the culture's cues rather than the Spirit and word of God. They were opposed to loving admonishment within the community, a way of life limited by the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

As Robert Mounce notes, "Balaam became a prototype of all corrupt teachers who betrayed believers into fatal compromise with worldly ideologies [playing the game the world's way]."⁸

It's an issue we still face today, in Dallas, Texas, in 2021. Will we lovingly call one another to sit under the Word who is Jesus, his life, ministry, death, and ruling resurrection. We will let the Spirit wield the two-edged sword to pierce our hearts, to do the surgery needed to discern which of our ways are more of a mix-together than they are the narrow path? Will we repent of our fear of admonishment of missing out on what we want because of the way of Jesus?

WHAT JESUS GIVES (Promise) | v. 17

To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

The two-fold promise of Jesus is meant to encourage patient endurance because of what we have and because of who we are. What is given to us as our provision for life now and as identity now and forever.

"To the Jew, 'to eat of the hidden manna' meant to enjoy the blessings of the messianic age. To a Christian, it meant to enter into the blessedness of the new world [completely different world] which would emerge when the kingdom came"⁹ as it did with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. A world and kingdom we wake up into each new morning since that first Easter Sunday.

In John's gospel (6:31-35), Jesus said that "I am the bread of life" and that to eat this would mean death would no longer be your enemy. "If the hidden manna and the bread of life are the same," contends Barclay, "the hidden manna...stands for nothing less than Christ, the bread of life; and this is a promise that to those who are

⁸ Mounce, 80-81.

⁹ Barclay, 105.

faithful he will give himself.”¹⁰ We have all that we need for life and godliness. All that we need to have peace amid the tribulation. All that we need to know how to live life well, completely different in the One who is The Way, The Truth, The Life; the King who wields a mouth like a sword.

The white stone with a new name given us is not only new in time (something experienced), but new in quality, never made before¹¹, completely different. Whoever you have come to know yourself to be through the name given to you by your parents (your history, your lineage, the things you’ve done and things done to you), whatever identity our culture and social constructs have formed for you to know yourself, are whited-out. You are purified and given access to the only relationship in which you can really know who you truly are.

Our scriptures are replete with stories of **new names that mark both a new status and the relational responsibility of that new name, partners in God’s witness and work**. Abram becomes Abraham when God chooses him to father a nation to bless the world (Gen. 17). Rebellious, conniving, mistrusting Jacob becomes Israel when he doesn’t give up his wrestling with God until he receives the blessing of being a part of God’s purpose for redemption (Gen. 32). Simon becomes Peter when Jesus chooses him (Jn. 1:42), the most human (and thus limited) of all the disciples, to continue His work in the world as He reigns in the heavens. And finishing where we started, Isaiah, the arrogant prophet, hears the promise of God to his people to bless the world through His relationship with them, and hears these words said over him, “The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings you glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give” (Is. 62:2).

Let’s pray.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 109.

SONG #3

A CORPORATE WORD | Dana Holtkamp

CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION w/ COMMUNION

Father God, we stand before you in humble adoration as we set our face to the tasks and interests of another week and season as Jesus' church.

Thank you for the blessed assurance that we shall not be called upon to face them alone or in our strength alone, but that at all times, we will be accompanied by your presence, strengthened by your grace, and encouraged by your family.

Thank you that throughout human life run the footprints of **our Lord and Savior, King and Sage, Priest and Friend**: Jesus Christ, who for our sake became flesh and tasted all the different challenges of daily living as well as the end we need no longer fear.

Thank you that as we go about our work and play, in pursuit of relationships and aspirations, we can be conscious of the spiritual presence of the heavenly host.

Thank you for the saints who rest from their labors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and prophetesses, apostles, noble martyrs, for all the holy and humble, for our dear departed friends and family who have shown us your way. As we remember them, we bless and adore your great name. **We rejoice, O Father, that you have called us to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ.**

Let the awareness of this holy fellowship follow us wherever we go, cheering us in loneliness, protecting us in company, strengthening us against temptation, and encouraging us to act in love and justice.

O Lord Jesus Christ, you called the disciples to shine as lights in a dark world. In remembrance and repentance, **we acknowledge before you the many faults and weaknesses of which we are guilty**, we who in this generation represent your Church to the world. **We, as Christ City Church especially acknowledge our part in this brokenness.**

Forgive us; we pray, the feebleness of our witness, the meagerness of our giving and loving, and the mediocrity of our zeal. **Help us** live equal in measure to love received, following the One who cared for the poor and the oppressed such as we.

Let the strength of your Spirit, O Jesus, be in us all, to share the world's suffering and redress its wrongs, in the fullness of your joy. **Through Jesus' life given, we live.** Amen.

SONG #4

BENEDICTION

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24-25)