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 Revelation 2:12-17  
 Fifth Message  
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# AVOIDING COMPROMISE

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Several years ago I read *Fear No Evil*, the autobiography of Natan Sharansky, the Soviet Jew who was imprisoned by the KGB in 1977 for requesting an exit visa to Israel. For nine years the KGB tried to break him. Realizing that direct force would not work, they tried subtly to make him compromise. But he refused to do so. Finally bowing to intense international pressure, Gorbachev released Sharansky and expelled him from the USSR. But when Sharansky arrived in Israel he found that life was unexpectedly complicated. Though he was now living in freedom, he looked back with a certain nostalgia to the true freedom he knew in his prison cell.

In freedom, I am lost in a myriad of choices. When I walk on the street, dozens of cheeses, fruits, and juices stare at me from store windows. There are vegetables here I've never seen or heard of, and an endless series of decisions that must be made: What to drink in the morning, coffee or tea? What newspaper to read? What to do in the evening? Where to go for the Sabbath? Which friends to visit?

In the punishment cell, life was much simpler. Every day brought only one choice: good or evil, white or black, saying yes or no to the KGB.<sup>1</sup>

In the black and white world of the KGB prison cell it was easy not to compromise. In the gray world of "freedom" it was much more difficult. We live in great freedom, but we are bombarded with choices. How do we navigate our way through these choices without compromising our identity as God's people? The Book of Revelation can help us greatly.

Today we come to the third message, that to the church in Pergamum. This church was tolerating those who were teaching that it was all right to compromise.

## A. The Message to the Church in Pergamum

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Pergamum:

**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, 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: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing 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.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden

manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. (Rev 2:12-17 NIV)

### 1. Pergamum

**To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: (2:12a)**

Pergamum was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. In fact, the province of Asia was created out of the kingdom of Pergamum, which Rome acquired in 133 BC. The city of Pergamum lies 85 miles north of Ephesus and 15 miles inland. Its lack of a port would eventually cost it its status as capital. But at the end of the first century AD, although Ephesus was already the more important city, Pergamum was still the capital. As capital, it was the official seat of the proconsul, the governor of the province.

Pergamum owed its existence to the massive acropolis that looms a thousand feet above the surrounding plain. This acropolis was covered with a magnificent set of public buildings. The most prominent of these was a large theater cut dramatically into the side of the hill. There was a library, second only to the one in Alexandria. Our word parchment is derived from the name Pergamum, for whose library this new writing medium was developed. There were many temples. The oldest temple on the acropolis was to Athene, the goddess of Pergamum. Outside it stood the great altar of Zeus Soter (Zeus Savior), built in the third century BC to commemorate victory in battle. One hundred years ago the German excavators removed the altar to a museum in Berlin, leaving only the base. In 29 BC, Pergamum built a temple to Rome and Augustus, the first city in Asia to build a temple for the imperial cult. Shortly after the Revelation was written, another imperial temple was built, at the very top of the acropolis, this one dedicated to the emperor Trajan.

There were other temples in the city that spread out across the plain at the foot of the hill. Also at the foot of the hill was the Asklepeion, a famous medical center dedicated to Asklepius, the god of healing, whose symbol was the serpent. People came from all over the Roman Empire seeking healing.

In this city of Pergamum was a church. It would have been a house church; in this city filled with temples the church had no building of its own. This church was living in the shadow of the acropolis: in the physical shadow of the hill itself; in the spiritual shadow of the temples up there, temples that acclaimed Caesar as divine, Zeus as Savior, Asklepius as Healer. In this dark city the church was a lampstand, bearing witness to God, and bearing witness to the Lamb who is the true Lord, the true Savior, the true Healer. It is to this church that Jesus Christ writes the third message.

### 2. Self-description of Jesus

**These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. (2:12b)**

The symbol of official power in the Roman Empire was the short, double-edged sword. In the province of Asia ultimate judicial power

rested in the hands of the proconsul, whose official seat of power was Pergamum. The proconsul had the sole authority to condemn people to death, authority vested in him by the Emperor. But the power wielded by the proconsul is not absolute at all, though he may think it is. Jesus reminds the church that above the proconsul is a greater authority, that of Jesus himself. The eyes of the saints in Pergamum are opened to see into the unseen realms. In the seen world, Rome bears the sword; in the unseen world it is Jesus who bears the sword. This is the sword of which the saints are to be conscious.

### 3. Prophetic Message

We should now be familiar with the structure of the prophetic message that Jesus delivers to each church: a statement of his knowledge concerning affairs in the church, followed by a prophetic pronouncement based upon that knowledge. Jesus' statement of knowledge contains both commendation and chastisement. First the commendation:

**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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. (2:13)**

There has been much speculation about the identity of Satan's throne. Perhaps it was the altar of Zeus that perched on the edge of the hill. From all over the city people would have seen the smoke of the offerings, offerings that proclaimed Zeus as Savior. Perhaps it was the temple to Augustus that proclaimed Caesar as lord. Or the whole complex of temples atop the acropolis that loomed so dramatically over the city. Or the throne-like appearance of the theater. Or the Asklepiion dedicated to Asklepius the Healer with his serpent symbol. Or the city itself as the seat of Roman Empire. Perhaps it was all of these. The church in Pergamum lived in the shadow of great darkness. For all the magnificence of these buildings, the ruins of which amaze the tourist today, Jesus describes them as Satanic. To acknowledge Zeus as savior, Caesar as lord, Asklepius as healer, is Satanic. Satan was well enthroned in Pergamum. But Jesus knows where his saints are living. He wants them there, as a lampstand blazing away in the midst of great darkness.

It would have been easy for the church to grow discouraged, to feel overwhelmed by all that loomed over it. But it had not. The saints had remained true to the name of Jesus. They had continued to bear testimony to Jesus. They had been faithful even to the point of death. Antipas, whom Jesus describes as "my faithful witness," had been put to death. Probably he had been publicly executed, condemned by the proconsul who alone had the authority to impose the death sentence, the proconsul who wielded the sword of judicial authority. Yet even then, the Christians did not buckle. Even then they resisted the temptation to renounce their faith in Jesus. They had remained faithful in the face of great external pressure.

But all is not well in the church in Pergamum:

**Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (2:14-15)**

The church had remained faithful in the face of external attack, but it was tolerating internal attack from false teachers. Jesus identifies two types of false teaching: the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We have already met the Nicolaitans in the

message to the church in Ephesus. The saints there had exposed these people as false teachers, but the church in Pergamum was tolerating them. We know very little about the Nicolaitans and their teaching, but it was evidently the same as what is here identified as the teaching of Balaam. It was also the same as the teaching of Jezebel which the church in Thyatira was tolerating.

We read about Balaam and Balak in the Old Testament, in Numbers 22-24. As the Israelites advanced up the east side of the Jordan Rift Valley, they passed through the land of Moab, and camped on the bank of the Jordan River opposite Jericho. Balak the king of Moab was terrified. Enlisting the help of Midian, he sent the elders of Moab and Midian on a long journey north to the River Euphrates, where lived a sorcerer named Balaam. Balak offered to pay Balaam handsomely if he would cast a curse upon Israel, but the Lord repeatedly overruled so that Balaam instead blessed Israel. But Balaam was greedy for Balak's money, so he suggested a more subtle approach: send Moabite and Midianite women over to the Israelite camp. It worked: we read that the Israelite "men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods" (Num 25:1-2; cf. 31:16). What Balak was unable to do overtly by having Balaam curse Israel, he did covertly by having the Moabite women lead the Israelite men into compromise.

The Israelites had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt; they had met with God at Sinai and there been constituted as his people; they had been blessed with God's care through their wilderness wanderings; and now they were camped on the Jordan River ready to enter the Promised Land. But they were also camped on the edge of Moabite territory. They failed to keep their distance. They forgot their identity: God had redeemed them to be a distinct people. They forgot their destiny: their eyes should have been on the goal set before them, the Promised Land that lay across the river. Instead they turned their eyes to what was behind them, Moab. With their eyes turned the wrong way, the Israelite men fell prey to the enticements of the Moabite women. They engaged in sexual immorality, and they engaged in idolatry, worshiping the Moabite gods, and sharing in the feasts dedicated to these gods.

There were two sins: sexual immorality and eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. These were a snare for the Israelites camped on the plains of Moab. They were also a snare for Christians in the first century. Sexual immorality and idolatry were rampant throughout the Roman Empire, except among the Jews. The Romans thought it so odd that Jews and Christians worshiped only one God that they called them atheists. And they thought it so odd that Jews and Christians refused to participate in much of the social life of the Empire that they called them misanthropic—antisocial people-haters. Much of civil life in the Roman Empire revolved around the temples. The temples were among the most prominent public buildings in any city. The priests and priestesses of the temple cults enjoyed high stature. Good citizens were expected to offer sacrifices to the gods. Most social gatherings included offerings to the gods, followed by a festive meal featuring food offered to the gods.

The early church, being Jewish, remained apart from this promiscuous and idolatrous life of the Roman Empire. But as Gentiles were incorporated into the church, the church leaders had to face the issue. In Jerusalem a council of the church leaders was convened to consider this remarkable conversion of Gentiles. After much debate over whether or not the Gentile believers should be required to become Jews, the leaders wrote a letter to the Gentile believers.

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things” (Acts 15:28-29). The Gentile believers did not need to become Jews; the Church would henceforth include both Jews as Jewish believers and Gentiles as Gentile believers. God had broken down the dividing wall of hostility, making one new people out of Jew and Gentile. But the believers were to refrain from participation in the promiscuous and idolatrous life of Rome.

In Pergamum 45 years later there were teachers contradicting this clear directive. They were blurring the line between the church and the world. And unlike in Ephesus, the church in Pergamum was tolerating this teaching. Certainly this compromise made life easier for the church. The Christians could participate more fully in the life of the city. They could participate more fully in work life, in the activities of the guilds to which all tradesmen belonged. They were spared the ridicule of work colleagues and neighbors. They were spared the disapproval of the officials who wanted all people to demonstrate their loyalty to city and to Rome. But they were ceasing to be the church.

Therefore, Jesus issues a command and a warning:

**Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. (2:16)**

Jesus calls on the church to repent. Repent of its toleration of these false teachers. Repent of its compromise that had blurred the line between the church and the world. Repent of its entanglement in the life of the world.

If they do not repent, Jesus warns that he will come to them. This coming is not the blessing for which the faithful saints are longing. It is a coming in judgment upon the false teachers. By compromising, the church need not fear the judicial sword wielded by the proconsul, the sword that killed Antipas, the faithful witness. But the church has a greater sword to fear, that wielded by Jesus. At the end of the book Jesus appears as the rider on the white horse, effortlessly destroying his enemies with the sword coming out of his mouth. The Church in Pergamum was looking to the wrong judge. They were afraid of the Roman judge, when it is the heavenly judge they should be fearing. They were acting to minimize the risk of sentence from Rome, but this was throwing them right into the hands of the heavenly judge. Jesus does not want a compromised church. He will fight to cleanse it.

#### 4. Promise to the Victor

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. (2:17)**

As in the other messages, Jesus issues a promise to the one who overcomes. In the context of the message to the church in Pergamum, the overcomer is the one who rejects this false teaching, who refuses to compromise, who resists getting entangled in the lifestyle of the Roman Empire. To this one Jesus promises to give three things: manna, a stone, and a name.

The faithful saints refuse to eat food sacrificed to idols. Such food may have been their only opportunity for meat. Meat was not part of the daily diet in the Mediterranean world, then or now. For their refusal to eat this earthly food, Jesus promises them manna, which is

heavenly food. It is hidden for it is unseen by the world. Jesus nourishes his people in this world, and he will nourish them in the next.

Jesus will give the faithful saints a white stone. There are many suggestions for the meaning of this white stone. The one which I find most appropriate to the context of this message understands the white stone as a token of acquittal. In courts of justice in the ancient world a black stone represented a guilt verdict and a white stone represented acquittal. When Paul made his defense to King Agrippa, he described how he had persecuted the church in Jerusalem: “On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them” (Acts 26:10). Literally, Paul cast a pebble, the same word as used here for “stone.” Though the faithful saints may be condemned by the authorities in Pergamum, Jesus will acquit them and usher them home into heaven.

The third thing Jesus gives is a new name. A name expresses identity. To the overcomer in the Philadelphia Jesus promises to write on him three names: “the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem...and my new name” (Rev 3:12). The identity of the believers lies in God, in Jesus, and in the New Jerusalem. It does not lie in Pergamum, in Asia, or in Rome. They are God’s people not Rome’s people, not Asia’s people, not Pergamum’s people.

#### B. Resisting Compromise

How are we to avoid compromise? The easy thing would be for me to simply say, “Don’t compromise otherwise Jesus will condemn you.” You would perhaps leave here with a renewed commitment not to compromise. Perhaps you would be motivated by a holy zeal for God, a zeal to live a holy life, a higher life, a victorious life. Perhaps you would be motivated by a fear of God’s judgment, of his disapproval. Before long you would confront the world. You would find yourself confronted with choices. How are you going to decide what to do? The obvious solution is to draw up a list of rules, a list of permissible and impermissible behavior. Many churches have followed this route, developing spoken or unspoken lists of what constitutes compromise with the world: smoking, drinking, dancing, going to movies, playing cards, growing facial hair. But this is legalism.

The Book of Revelation doesn’t follow this route. Jesus does not give these seven churches a detailed list of do’s and don’ts. He doesn’t carefully delineate the boundary between the church and the world in terms of daily behavior. What Jesus does instead is give the churches a vision, a vision of their identity and a vision of their destiny.

Jesus gives the churches a vision of their identity. They are lampstands. It would be much easier if the Christians could escape to the desert and live as a holy huddle, with no polluting contact with the outside world. But Jesus doesn’t want his churches to live like that. He wanted this church to be in Pergamum, in the shadow of the acropolis. Amidst a culture of immorality and idolatry the church is to shine as a bright light. He wants PBCC to be a lampstand in the midst of Silicon Valley, blazing with God’s light.

The book of Revelation describes two sets of people. One group is at home on the earth, living in Babylon. It bears the mark of the beast, and worships the beast. The other group, though living on earth, is not at home on earth. The members of this group will only be home when they are dwelling in heaven, for their home is the New Jerusalem. They bear the seal of the Lamb. Rather than worship the beast, they are destined for the throne where they will wor-

ship the Lamb. The Book of Revelation alternates between visions of heaven and visions of earth. It is these visions of heaven that remind the saints on earth of their true identity. They see that their martyred brethren like Antipas are already in heaven gathered around the throne of God and the Lamb. They see that, although the Roman beast thought it had conquered Antipas, it was Antipas who emerged victorious in the end.

Jesus gives the churches a vision of their destiny. The two sets of people have different destinies. Those who have been seduced by the deceptions of the dragon, the false prophet and Babylon are destined for the second death, the lake of fire, where they will be joined by the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, even death and Hades. They will be removed from God's presence. The faithful saints are destined for the new heavens and the new earth, for the New Jerusalem, where they will see the face of God and live forever in his presence. This is only what both sets of people have desired all along. Again to quote C. S. Lewis, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"<sup>2</sup> The faithful saints in Revelation are longing for the coming of Jesus. The rest are blaspheming God, hiding their faces from him, and trying to live their lives apart from him.

Most people consider that the Book of Revelation is useful only for developing timetables for the future. But this book is of tremendous value for today. We live in a gray world, in which it can be hard to discern right from wrong, permissible from impermissible. As Natan Sharansky found, it is much more difficult to avoid compromise in a gray world than in a black-and-white world. Revelation redraws the colors. In Revelation there are no grays, only black and white. You bear either the mark of the beast or the seal of the Lamb. You are either at home in this world or headed to be at home in heaven. Your home is either Babylon or the New Jerusalem. You either worship the beast or you are headed to worship the Lamb. There is no middle ground. The seen world is filled with gray. But the Revelation opens our eyes to the unseen world where things are black and white. This vision of the black and white of the unseen world sharpens our vision so that we can see more clearly in this seen world.

Though we are destined for the New Jerusalem, God wants us to live here in Cupertino. PBCC is to be a lampstand here in Silicon Valley. We don't avoid the world, separating ourselves into a monastic life. But we don't seek to become like the world. Instead, we live in the world but not of the world. We are no longer at home in the world. To walk the tightrope between being in but not of the world, we need a clear vision of our identity and of our destiny. This is what Revelation gives us. It is this vision that enables us to preserve our passion, defy death, and avoid compromise until Jesus comes.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.

1. Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (New York: Random House, 1988), 423.

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Fontana, 1972 [1946]), 66-67.