

Pergamum – A Hidden Life

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[0 : 0 0] How do you hold out when you are completely surrounded? We're all familiar enough with film and TV to know that when the heroes are surrounded by their enemies, things are not looking good.

What about when the church feels herself to be surrounded? Because the church community in Pergamum was in exactly this position.

The culture that this church was based in was so firmly against Jesus and the gospel that Jesus himself describes it as the place where Satan has his throne.

Now that doesn't sound to me like the kind of situation I'd like a church to be in. The church under a heavy fire in enemy territory and the enemy closing in.

And we too live in a culture where Christ is not recognized or loved. His name is used more often as an exclamation rather than as a name to be worshipped.

[0 : 5 9] There are fewer Christians and fewer churches. We live in what one writer has called a secular age. And sometimes it can feel like Satan has set up his throne here as well.

Now being a Christian in Glasgow today is not as hard as it would have been for the Christians in Pergamum. It's very unlikely, at least I hope so, that any of us will die for the name of Jesus.

Nevertheless, we do live in a culture that is increasingly moving away from Jesus and the hope of the gospel. And we live in a culture that increasingly sees Christians as the bad guys.

Because Christians hold to certain views which are no longer considered appropriate or acceptable in this cultural moment. We stand up for the lives of the unborn.

We stand up for sex only occurring in a marriage between one man and one woman. We stand up for two genders according to the order of God's creation. These beliefs make our culture view us as, in many ways, the bad guys.

[2 : 0 9] We're rebels against the new status quo and the new morality. And increasingly it can feel like we are isolated, under-equipped, and a surrounded band of rebels.

The experience of a church like the church in Pergamum teaches us about the challenges of being a church surrounded by a culture enthralled to Satan.

And they teach us about why being surrounded is not the end of the world and not a reason to give up or give in. When in those films or TV shows, when our heroes are surrounded, we usually suspect that helps just round the corner.

We're just waiting for it to arrive from off screen and for victory to be snatched from the jaws of defeat. Well, similarly, for the church that feels herself to be surrounded, we're always just waiting for Christ to come.

The surrounded church is not the defeated church. She's the church on the cusp of an unexpected victory. And that's why, though Jesus might not have that much clout in culture, he's worth following, knowing, and worshipping.

[3 : 23] So our first point as we work through this letter to the church in Pergamum is this. We live in a land of shadow. And we need to learn how to live where Satan's throne is.

We've been reading through the Lord of the Rings, so I'm going to use it as an illustration. In the 12th chapter of Tolkien's The Return of the King, the hobbits, Frodo and Sam, enter the evil land of Mordor, a place Tolkien calls the land of shadow.

And in the land of shadow, where the dark lord Sauron rules from his high tower, the hobbits feel weak and isolated and ill-equipped. And as they look across the land of shadow, things look hopeless.

Because there are thousands and thousands of enemies before them and between them and their goal. I think there's a sense in which, in some ways, we as Christians traverse a land of shadow.

And that's certainly the image that's conveyed here when Jesus says this to the church in Pergamum. I know where you live, where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name.

[4 : 36] 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. Pergamum was, like Ephesus and Smyrna, which we've seen before in previous weeks, was a center of idol worship and pagan religion.

They had famous temples to various deities. And they had the dubious honor of being the first city to build a temple to a living emperor, to Caesar Augustus, whenever he was ruling Rome.

This wasn't a culture that warmed to the exclusive claims of the gospel. The claim that there is one God and one Savior, Jesus Christ.

How, though, can Jesus, who is God himself, how can he speak of Satan's throne? Because surely, compared to Jesus, Satan has no power.

Well, though Jesus has much more power than Satan, until the day that Jesus comes back, he does have a kind of power. He is, as it were, on a leash.

[5 : 44] Paul, when he was writing to the Ephesian Christians, he described Satan as the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

And Jesus himself calls him the prince of this world. And later in Revelation, the idea that the devil is a real enemy comes up time and time again.

In one section, he's compared to a dragon who is hurled to the earth at the moment when Christ won his victory at the cross. And the dragon goes off to wage war against the church.

And so the whole New Testament declares boldly and clearly that Jesus Christ is king. And yet it also acknowledges that for a time, the devil does actually have power.

He is the ruler of the kingdom of the air. He is at work within the spirit of the age. He is, in some ways, the captain-steering culture. An enemy sowing weeds that grow up and try to strangle that which is true and good and holy.

[6 : 51] That's why we have to be careful in our cultural engagement. Because nothing in this world is really neutral. There is no such thing as a true neutral position. I mean, that can refer to trivial things like Marmite, but to more serious things as well.

Such as where one stands in, for example, the abortion discussion. There are no real neutral grounds. Claims to neutrality are fictions. And everything in culture tells a story.

Every song, every advert, every chat show, every Netflix rom-com pedals a worldview, a way of seeing the world. Every poster that we see on the way to work.

Every podcast that we subscribe to. Even every conversation we have is rooted in a particular way of seeing the world. And at the end of the day, the Bible tells us that there really are only two ways of seeing the world.

Only really two worldviews. The first is that God is God. And Jesus Christ is his son. Who died as a substitute for those who trust in him.

[7 : 57] Because their sins have brought them under God's fair and reasonable judgment. But once saved in Jesus, there is a hope of eternal life. That's the first worldview. The second is this.

That God is not God. That he does not deserve our worship. That he does not define what right and wrong is. And therefore, no one is guilty of sin. We have the right to live as we please.

And if there is an existence beyond what we know, well, we're probably good enough to deserve eternal bliss. That's roughly the second. The first worldview is rooted in a foundation.

The Christian knows who they are. Who their maker is. And where they're going. They also recognize their own failures. What the Bible calls sin. And their part in the brokenness in the world around us.

The second worldview, I would argue, is rooted in doubt. Self-centeredness. Blindness. And a hope that has no foundations. Because there are no real answers.

[9 : 01] It's a worldview that, certainly in the terms of this letter, turns away from Jesus and into the arms of Satan. Or as was in the case of Pergamum, into the arms of idols.

We all worship. We are all worshipers. In many ways, we're programmed to worship. For Pergamum, the people worship the emperor.

And they put their hope in him. And people do that today. Their hope is in a political party. Or a movement. Or a figure. The people in Pergamum also worship the goddess Sclapios, who is the idol of health.

People can do that today. Basing their hope and identity on fitness programs, health tonics, toilet paper with added vitamins. The whole shebang. We always imagine that we're much smarter than the ancient pagans.

But we're not really. We all worship idols the same as they did. They just don't always come in temples. And where there is an idol, well, that's really where Satan's throne is.

[10 : 07] And there are many possible things that can be idols. Good and bad. Sexual pleasure. Money. Comfort. Family. Wellness. Self-expression.

Political movements. Cultural movements. Literally anything can be an idol. Anything can be worshipped. And when you realize that, you also realize that, well, we live where Satan is.

Satan lives. Just like these Christians here in Pergamum. Which is why Jesus commends the church in Pergamum for their faithful witness. In a culture that rejected all that the gospel stands for.

There was even, we learn, a Christian called Antipas who died for believing in the name of Jesus. And Jesus loves them. Because they did not renounce their faith in him.

In a culture where Satan has set up his throne, there's always going to be an intense pressure to abandon the name of Jesus and distance ourselves from his message and his church.

[11 : 10] And this, I suspect, will be even more pronounced in a month like June where everyone pays homage to the pride flag. And that's a controversial thing to say.

Because we are, as I've said, kind of the bad guys. And Satan does have a ruling presence here. But we can stand firm in a loving and compassionate way just as Christ did.

And it's possible because Jesus is a greater power than the dragon, than the prince of this world. Jesus is the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

In the early years of high school, this is not a particularly fond memory, but I remember being bullied. It wasn't fun. But I reckon if I had a bodyguard standing behind me with a massive, double-edged sword, I think I probably would have been slightly less afraid of the schoolyard bullies.

And as Christians, that's kind of the image that we're given here. Jesus stands behind us with a massive sword. That's the image conveyed. He can cut that serpent down in a flash.

[12 : 18] He's much more powerful than the prince of this world. And though we might suffer for keeping the faith and following him, he is with us.

We can stand up to cultural bullies and the whole world because we know the commander of the army of the Lord. He is with us.

If God is for us, who can be against us? But what happens when the culture infiltrates the church? How do we respond when the enemies are on the inside, if you like?

What happens when the church starts reflecting not Jesus in the gospel, but rather the worldview of everybody else? What must we do when the church is no longer distinctive and is like salt that's lost its taste?

And this is where the Christians in Pergamum had started to get things a little wrong. And it's where their cautionary lesson for the church today, just as their faithful witness is a positive example for us to emulate.

[13 : 24] Jesus warns them, 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.

Just as the sword of Christ will one day fall on Satan, it can also fall on those within the church who muddy the teaching and distort the truth as we have it in the Bible.

So what had happened in Pergamum? What so often happens when you're surrounded by a culture or a society or a movement that is against the gospel message, that is the message of our sin, of Jesus saving us from that sin and then calling us to live for him in hope and holiness, when you're surrounded by a worldview that goes against that, it's not going to be long before the culture starts edging its way in and infiltrating the church.

It happened in Pergamum. They were standing for Jesus. But at the same time, a group called the Nicolaitans had been twisting the teaching of that church.

[14 : 52] And it seems to be that they were saying that you could worship Jesus and worship idols. They were saying you can follow Jesus and indulge in the sexual freedom of the culture.

When you read the Bible, you see that this goes against all that Jesus and his apostles taught. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says, flee from sexual immorality.

And then later on, he says, flee from idolatry. He reminds them of what Jesus has done for them and why that means they actually can't live as they used to.

And Paul puts it like this. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you receive from God? You are not your own.

You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies. And in another place, Paul reminds us we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

[15 : 54] The point is, you cannot worship Christ and be enslaved to the idols of the age or indulge in the sexual freedom of the age.

We've been talking about Pergamum, but perhaps you can already see the relevance to our own culture. And in fact, because Jesus invokes the example of Balaam, we see that this is not an isolated incident, but actually it's a common temptation for God's people and Christ's church, really in every age.

In the Old Testament book of Numbers, Balaam was a prophet who was paid by Balak, who was king of the Moabites. And he was paid to curse the people of Israel during their time where they were wandering in the wilderness as they traveled from Egypt, where, as we've been learning over the past few weeks, where they were slaves and as they were heading towards the promised land of Canaan.

And long story short, whenever Balaam tried to curse them, it really didn't work out because every time he tried to curse Israel, he ended up blessing them because God made him bless the people.

And this happened seven times. What Balaam then does instead was he advises Balak to tempt the Israelites into sin using the twin temptations of sex and idols.

[17 : 15] And the book of Numbers puts it like this. While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods.

The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and the Lord's anger burned against them.

When the world around us is against the gospel, the next thing that happens is that the world infiltrates the church and encourages the church to be lax on its sexual ethics and its idols.

It happened in the wilderness. It happened in Pergamum. And it happens today. And if I might be controversial again, we see this any time a church or a minister celebrate any other sexual union than that of marriage between one man and one woman.

And it is increasingly more commonplace. You know, the church doesn't hold to a traditional definition of marriage and view of sex because we're bigoted or cruel or even old-fashioned.

[18 : 23] We hold to it because Jesus says that's the right way to do things. And he calls us to it because he wants the best for us.

You cannot choose Jesus and then choose to live in a way that he speaks against. He hasn't left us that option. But, and I add this as an important aside, because the sexual ethic of Christianity is so different from what our culture believes, we must be kind and considerate whenever we speak about God's truth and particularly God's truth on this issue with others.

Perhaps you're here this afternoon and what I'm saying does sound intolerant and bigoted. If that's the case, please don't leave without at least chatting to myself or Jonathan or someone else.

Because I really would love to listen. I really would love to chat. Because we really do love as Jesus loves. But we're also committed to what Jesus says is truly the best way to flourish.

And that entails a devotion to Jesus, which can seem strange to those on the outside. And it entails a sexual ethic, which can be seen as restricting and intolerant to those on the outside.

[19 : 41] But Jesus says he won't tolerate it inside his church. And that's something we and the church more broadly must take seriously. Christians must not look like the culture around them.

They must instead look like Jesus Christ. That means we don't endorse or celebrate every worldview or every teaching. We must not endorse that which Jesus says is untrue or unhelpful.

And tolerance isn't always a good thing. We must not tolerate, and I'm sure everyone agrees, at least in principle, if not with specifics. We must not tolerate that which goes against that which we know and understand to be true and good.

But I hasten to add we must always love. In this way, the church will continue to be a faithful witness and a distinctive light that points to Jesus. And this brings us to our final point.

What is the point of being a Christian if it means you have to live in a way that is so countercultural? As we've no doubt realized, being a Christian in Glasgow today can be kind of controversial at points.

[20 : 58] Wouldn't it be easier to, at the very least, be a Christian who affirms and allies with the culture? It would save a lot of bother. Well, as we've said, to be a Christian means we can't always align ourselves with the views of the wider society.

But the reason to be a Christian in this kind of scenario is because our life is not rooted in this culture. As Paul memorably put it, we are citizens of heaven.

Our hope is in Christ. But what does that mean? Why is it worth holding to a controversial set of values? What good does it actually do?

Let's listen to what Jesus says in the final verse of this letter. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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. What's Jesus saying here? Well, he is in effect saying that the Christian has acquired a hidden life.

[22 : 07] Let me explain what I mean by looking at these two images that Jesus gives us. Jesus says to the Christian who keeps following him, i.e. the one who is victorious, he will give some of the hidden manna.

Manna was, I'm slightly jumping the gun a bit, because we're going to look at this in more detail next week. But manna was an edible substance that God gave to his people when they were wandering in the wilderness and had nothing to eat.

Bread of heaven was sometimes the description that was attached to it. Jesus isn't promising Christians today that we'll feast on that same bread of heaven. Rather, Jesus is using this imagery of heavenly food to say to the Christians in Pergamum, you don't need to be eating at these feasts for idols.

You have a better feast awaiting you. Later in the book of Revelation, we're going to see that at the end of time, when Jesus returns, all who have trusted in him and know him are invited to what's called the marriage supper of the Lamb.

It's a day when everyone whom Jesus has called will feast with him in his perfect new creation, a perfect world free from evil, from pain, from suffering, and from sin.

[23 : 22] We actually experience a brief taste of that today whenever Christians share the Lord's Supper together, a gift of bread and wine that imparts the blessings of Christ to his people.

And Jesus called himself the bread of life. He said, just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. What he meant when he said, whoever feeds on this bread will live forever, is that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

Whoever knows and follows him will be invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb to celebrate the victory of the Lamb. And that's also behind the image of the white stone.

These sorts of stones were used in Roman culture, a bit like invitations that would admit you to your table at a great feast. And so the Christian is given a white stone by Jesus.

[24 : 30] It's an invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb with a name written on it, a new name. And that name we learn later in the book of Revelation is the name of Jesus.

In the vision of the perfect future, using the imaginative language of this book, we're told that no longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him.

They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads. It's not a literal description. I don't think we're literally going to have his name graven on our foreheads, but rather it's a picture that makes the point that the Christian bears a new name.

And that name is the name of our Savior. We're united to Christ. That's how we began our time together, singing about our union with Christ. We bear his name as a picture of that.

In effect, we are given a new identity in our union with him. As Paul put it, your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

[25 : 38] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Because the Christian hope is not in this world or this culture.

It's not based on pleasing the people around us. It's based on something much more solid. Our life is hidden with Christ.

And he invites us to the feast at the end of time if we know him. He invites us to taste of this eternal life which he freely offers to everyone.

And this is what it looks like to have a hidden life. Our life is not hidden from the world. We must be faithful witnesses. Rather, we can be faithful witnesses because Jesus is our life.

Our life and future are hidden in him. And we are kept safe by him. One final illustration as we close.

[26 : 39] I watched a film recently, Matt McCarty's recommendation, called A Hidden Life. Which is what I've titled the sermon. And it tells the story of an Austrian Christian during the rise of the Nazis.

He refuses to swear an oath of allegiance to Hitler. Because that's what he, I think, rightly deems is truly what following Christ demands. That he shouldn't swear that oath of allegiance to anyone but Jesus.

Many other Christians in his village and in the country are willing to go along to get along. A bit like what we see here in Pergamum. And I fear a bit like what we may see in Scotland.

But this man refuses to abandon his faith. He refuses to abandon the principles of following Jesus Christ alone as Lord.

He won't ally himself to Hitler or anyone else. He's faithful to Christ and recognizes Jesus as his one and only king. Though it's a sad story, the story has no happy ending.

[27 : 42] He suffers and he dies. Because he is committed to the way of Jesus. And committed to the name of Jesus. And the way Christ calls his people to live.

But yet on the other hand, for those who know, well actually there is a happy ending beyond that final frame of the film. Because the one who is victorious, who holds their course, who keeps being faithful to Jesus, will taste of the hidden manna and will receive a white stone with a new name.

The one who is faithful will enjoy a future feasting in the house of the Lord for all eternity at the marriage supper of the Lamb. The one who is faithful has their life hidden with Christ in God.

And when Christ who is our life appears, then we also will appear with him in God.