

Revelation 2:8-17 “Smyrna and Pergamum: What Does It Look Like to Be Faithful?” May 19, 2019
Micah 6
Psalm 106

Micah seems to assume that God’s people remember the story of Balaam and Balak.

Balak had wanted to curse Israel –
so he called the great seer, Balaam, son of Beor,
and offered to pay him a princely sum if he would curse Israel.
But the LORD appeared to Balaam and ordered him to bless Israel,
and so Balaam – being a good polytheist –
obeyed the deity that actually showed up and told him what to do!!

You see, if you are a good polytheist – and you believe in many gods –
then when a god shows up and tells you what to do,
you generally do it!

While Balaam did prophesy true things about Israel –
he never devoted himself to Israel’s God!
We are told in Numbers 25 and 31 that Balaam concocted a plan
whereby the Moabites could still curse Israel!
Balaam couldn’t curse Israel himself – but he advised Balak
that if the *women* of Moab and Midian would go and seduce the Israelite men,
they could get the Israelites to worship other gods,
and then Yahweh would curse Israel for them!!

This is why Balaam becomes the perfect example of sexual immorality
and eating food sacrificed to idols.

And, what is more, we actually have extrabiblical evidence about Balaam
that fits exactly what we know from the Bible.

There is an inscription from around 800 B.C. that purports to be an oracle from the prophet Balaam.
It tells the story of how Balaam saved the world from some apocalyptic disaster.
It also indicates that Balaam plainly worshiped many gods
and promoted sexual immorality.

So we are not surprised that the prophet Micah, here in Micah 6,
uses Balaam as his central character in setting up the question of how to come before God.

The same episode is referred to in Psalm 106,
when it speaks of how Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.

This has been a problem for the people of God over and over throughout history.

We, like our fathers, have refused to walk in the ways of our God.

Psalm 106 retells the story of Israel, from the crossing of the Red Sea to the Exile,
focusing on the wilderness wanderings –
and reminding us of the story of our fathers –
a story that we need to remember –
because we have a tendency to repeat it!

This tune was written particularly for Psalm 106 –
the name of the tune, “Chesed” is the Hebrew word often translated “steadfast love”
or “covenant mercy.”
We wanted a tune that would be good for story telling –
that could bear the weight of a longer Psalm –
but also one that would capture the back and forth of Israel’s sin
and God’s salvation!
Because while the song tells the story of rebellion and sin –
it also tells the story of God’s steadfast love – his *hesed*.

Sing Psalm 106
Read Revelation 2

One of the central themes in the seven letters is the call to repentance.
Five of the seven churches are deeply flawed.
The other two are suffering under persecution!

Things are not the way they should be!
We are not the way we should be!

It never surprises me when I see sin in the church.
The church is deeply flawed!
But that’s *not okay!!*
It’s *not okay* for the church to be deeply flawed!
When we see sin in our lives, or in our life together – we need to repent.

We need Jesus.

But this is why John said to us –
“I, John, your brother and partner
in the tribulation and kingdom and patient endurance that are in Jesus”

At our worst, we have sinned and need to repent.
At our best, we suffer trials and tribulations.

But the whole of the Christian life is lived *in Jesus*.

Also, each of the letters to the seven churches
begins by connecting backwards to the vision of the Son of Man in chapter 1,
and ends by connecting to the final vision in chapters 21-22.

That also suggests that the middle of each letter
connects to the middle of the book of Revelation.

Which means that the basic point of these letters
is very much the same as the basic point of the whole book!

The Christian life always starts with Jesus.
It is characterized by suffering and affliction (the way of the cross)
and for those who persevere – for those who conquer – it ends in glory!

1. Smyrna: Be Faithful unto Death in the Midst of Tribulation (v8-11)

a. “The Words”: Jesus is the God Who Triumphed over Death (v8)

⁸ *“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’”*

In each of the seven letters, Jesus identifies himself by using a description from chapter 1
Here the focus is Jesus as God – and Jesus as the one who rose from the dead.
“The words of the first and the last.”

This is language that is only used by God in the OT.

In Isaiah 44:6, God says,

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer,
the LORD of hosts:

‘I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.’”

Likewise, in Isaiah 48:12, God says,

“Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called!

I am he; I am the first, and I am the last.”

Now Jesus says “the words of the first and the last” –

Jesus says, I am the Yahweh of hosts who spoke to Israel of old.

But at the same time, Jesus identifies himself as the one who died and came to life.

This is striking.

I am God – the God of Israel –

but I am also the God who died and came to life.

I am the God who is above history (the first and the last) –

but I am also the God who entered history and triumphed over death.

Only a man – only a descendent of Adam – could pay Adam’s debt.
But only God – only one who had the power of an infinite life – could survive Adam’s debt!

Because the wages of sin is death.
Can you triumph over death?
Can you defeat the grave?

Jesus says, “I am the first and the last, who died and came to life.”

b. “I Know”: Jesus Knows Your Situation (v9)

⁹ *“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander^[a] of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

And Jesus says “I know your tribulation and your poverty.”

Tribulation is a key theme in these letters.

John says at the beginning of Revelation 1:9 –

“I John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and kingdom and patient endurance that are in Jesus...”

What characterizes the Christian life?

Tribulation
and kingdom
and patient endurance.

We saw in the letter to Ephesus (verses 1-7)

the focus on “patient endurance” (v2 and v3).

Here in verses 8-11 the focus is on tribulation (v9 and v10).

And every one of the seven letters ends with a focus on kingdom –

“the one who conquers.”

But Jesus also says that he knows their poverty –

and yet he adds “but you are rich”!

They may be poor in the goods of the world,
but they are rich in faith –
they are rich in the things that matter! –
because they have been faithful in the midst of affliction.

What sort of persecution did they face?

At first, Roman governors tended to view Christians as being under the general category of “Jew.”

This was important because the Jews had received the right of not offering sacrifices to Caesar.

(Under Roman law, everyone was required to worship Caesar as a god –
except the Jews,

who were allowed to offer sacrifices merely “in honor” of the emperor)

As we go through Revelation 2-3, we will often see references to “eating food sacrificed to idols.”

The most common form this would take

is when you were called to participate in a civic feast dedicated to the emperor.

If you were *anyone* in society,

then you would be expected to participate in worshiping the emperor.

“City officials were so dedicated to [this] that they even distributed money to citizens from public funds to pay for sacrifices to the emperor.

It was almost impossible to have a share in a city’s public life

without also having a part in some aspect of the imperial cult.” (B 240-241)

Those who refused to participate were seen as politically disloyal and unpatriotic and could be imprisoned, executed, or banished.

We should be grateful that while our current political environment is *challenging* – it is nowhere near that level!

Oh, sure, you can be ridiculed and mocked for holding Christian *beliefs* –

you can be fired from some jobs for maintaining Christian *practices* –

but so far, as far as I can tell, we are not being required to worship another god.

(though as we go through the book of Revelation

we will see that we are not far short of that!)

We often find ourselves in situations where we face a choice:

will we be faithful to Jesus?

Or will we compromise with the world?

At first, so long as Christians were viewed as a branch of Judaism,

Christians were not really targets of Roman persecution.

And when you read through the book of Acts,

it is clear that Paul generally began his ministry in the Jewish synagogue,

only forming separate Christian communities

after they were kicked out of the synagogue.

Why was that?

Because the apostles were convinced that the gospel of Jesus is simply “true Judaism.”

It’s not that the Gentiles “replace” the Jews.

It’s that Jesus is the true Israel.

He is the promised Son of David – the Messiah –

who restores the kingdom of God as promised by the prophets.

It's not that God rejects the Jews and starts over.
Rather, the Gentiles are *grafted in* to the Abrahamic vine.
There are not "two" people of God – Jew and Gentile –
there is *one* new man in Jesus Christ.
There is *one olive tree*.

How should we think about the Jewish people today?
Paul says in Romans 11 that they are "native branches" to the olive tree.
The Gentiles are wild branches that have been grafted in.
But Jews who reject the gospel of Jesus
are native branches which have been pruned off –
and are lying on the ground.
They are native to the olive tree,
so it is easier to graft them back in!
But they are *no longer connected to the tree*.

That is why Jesus says here:
they "say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

Satan is the accuser – and so when Jews accused Christians of not really being Jews –
and therefore not under the protection afforded to Jews by the empire –
Jesus says that they are acting like Satan.

Now at this point I need to acknowledge that far too often Christians have returned the favor.
If you know anything about the history of Jewish-Christian relations,
you know that Christians very often mistreated the Jews.
And that was wrong.

It does no good to say "but they did it first!" –
where does the cycle of vengeance end?
It either ends with everybody dead –
or else with one dying in the place of another.

And if our Lord and Master is the one "who died and came to life" –
then we may have confidence that when we choose to end the cycle of vengeance
with *forgiveness* –
bearing in our bodies the judgment that others deserved.

If you are a Christian – if you claim to be a disciple of the one who was crucified by Rome –
then you cannot use the power of the sword to persecute others for their religious beliefs.

c. So Do Not Fear Tribulation... (v10a)

¹⁰ *Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into*

prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

But because Jesus *knows* our situation, he is also able to encourage us:

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.”

After all – Jesus himself has suffered once for sinners!

He is the one who died and came to life!

(Remember chapter 1, verse 5 –

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father...”)

Therefore, he promises you that your suffering is not the end of the story!

Yes, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison,
that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

The language of “ten days” tribulation comes from Daniel chapter 1 –
where Daniel and his friends faced a ten day trial.

Daniel did not want to eat meat sacrificed to idols,
so he and his friends ate only vegetables for ten days.

So when Jesus speaks of this “ten day” trial
he is reminding us of Daniel’s faithfulness in the face of trials in Babylon.

And God blessed Daniel –

giving him favor in the sight of the Babylonians,
which enabled him and his friends to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols.

Daniel and his three friends became a model for the early church
as an example of faithfulness in the face of persecution.

In the Roman world, imprisonment was only temporary –
a holding cell for trial.

So when you hear that the devil is going to throw some of you in prison,
that's not where the story ends...

and indeed, Jesus exhorts the church:

d. But Be Faithful, Because the Crown of Life Awaits (v10b)

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

This is rooted in what Jesus said about himself:

“the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.”

Jesus calls you to be faithful unto death.

Around the year 155, the bishop of Smyrna was a man named Polycarp.
According to Irenaeus (who had met Polycarp),
 Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John,
 and that John himself had ordained Polycarp as bishop of Smyrna.
But over sixty years later,
 Polycarp himself was burned at the stake for his refusal to sacrifice to Caesar.
The author who wrote the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* shortly thereafter
 plainly knew the book of Revelation,
 and says that Polycarp was “crowed with the crown of immortality”
 through his suffering – and that “by his endurance he overcame [or “conquered”]
 the unrighteous ruler, and in this manner gained the crown of immortality.”
 (B, 244)

Some of you may face persecution and death for the sake of Christ.
But all of you are called to be faithful unto death!
Only enduring faith – persevering faith – unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection!
 A faith that wavers and dies is not saving faith!

Saving faith is a faith that endures patiently until the end.

That’s why John said that he is our brother and partner
 “in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.”

e. “Hear”: The One Who Conquers Will Not Be Hurt by the Second Death (v11)
¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’

Because the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.
 At the end of Revelation we will hear about the second death.
 The first death is what we usually call death.
 The second death refers to eternal death –
 what we often refer to as “hell.”

But Jesus promises that the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.
 Receiving the crown of life means to live forever.
 In the same way, the second death means to die forever.

And so the one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.
 There is some irony here –
 after all, how do you conquer?
 You conquer by being faithful unto death.
 Which means that the only way to *conquer* is by dying!

This is why *patient endurance* is essential to the kingdom of Jesus!
The way of power – the way of domination – is doomed to fail!
The only way to conquer is the way of the cross!

Now, this is why I wanted to include Smyrna and Pergamum in the same sermon!
Notice how Jesus opens this letter!

2. Pergamum: Repent or I Will Come in Battle (v12-17)

a. “The Words”: Jesus Is the Judge (v12)

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

The letter to Smyrna is all filled with comfort in the midst of trial and tribulation.
The letter to Pergamum focuses on the theme of judgment and battle –
and particularly how *Jesus* comes in judgment and battle
against those of his own people who do not repent!

The sharp two-edged sword is designed for Jesus’ enemies –
but Jesus has enemies in the church!

But first Jesus comes with comfort for those who have been loyal to his name:

b. “I Know”: You Hold Fast to My Name Even Where Satan Dwells (v13)

¹³ *“I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith^[b] even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.*

It may seem odd to call Pergamum the place “where Satan dwells”!

But Pergamum was the first city in Asia Minor to build a temple to the emperor –
and one of the emblems of the city was the serpent symbol of Asclepius,
the Greek god of healing.

Verse 13 starts: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is...”

Verse 13 ends: “...where Satan dwells.”

Light and darkness cannot dwell together.

If we are faithful witnesses to Jesus,
then there *will be* those who hate us.

“A witnessing church will be a persecuted church.” (B 247)

And, not surprisingly, when persecution arises,
there will be those who prefer compromise...

c. “But”: You Have Some Who Hold to the Teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (v14-15)

¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

We saw last time that the only thing we know about the Nicolaitans
is that they were followers of Nicolaus!

But we have no idea who Nicolaus was – or what he taught –
except that he seems to have something in common with Balaam.

We know that Nicolaus means “he overcomes the people” –
whereas the rabbis claimed that Balaam means “he who consumes the people”
(or, he who rules the people). (B 251)
So it is very likely that Jesus intends for us to see the Nicolaitans
as the modern followers of Balaam
(indeed, Nicolaus could simply be a Greek translation of “Balaam”).

You can see how it would be explained:

‘We know that idols aren’t real –
and the meat comes from animals that were made by God –
and God made all things good –
so it’s not wrong to eat food sacrificed to idols!!’

‘Further, if we are going to bear witness to Jesus in this culture,
then we need to participate in the life of the city.
We need to be involved, connected, fully engaged in the community.’

Doesn’t that make sense?

Don’t we actually hear very similar arguments being used today?
The Nicolaitans were undoubtedly sincere.
They were not trying to subvert the witness of the church!
They probably thought that they were being faithful to Paul’s exhortation
to be all things to all people!

But Jesus says that such activity is spiritual adultery.

When he condemns them for sexual immorality
he *may* be referring to physical adultery and fornication –
but throughout the book of Revelation,
sexual immorality is used to portray spiritual betrayal of Jesus.

The book will come to its grand climax at the wedding supper of the Lamb –

and so any unfaithfulness to the Lord Jesus
is the equivalent of adultery.

Certainly in our day we can see many churches that have tolerated sexual immorality.
Pastors and people alike have been guilty of sexual sin,
which can only harm the people of God – the bride of Christ!
And you can easily see how sexual sin breaks down the resistances of the people of God.
If we have engaged in sexual immorality,
then we have this part of our life that is sealed off from God –
that we are trying to protect from scrutiny...

And when we refuse to repent, the result is that we compromise with the world.

d. “Therefore”: Repent or I Will Come and War Against Them (v16)

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

Do you happen to remember what happened to Balaam when his donkey rebuked him?

Numbers 22:31 says:

“Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam,
and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way,
with his drawn sword in his hand...” (Numbers 22:31)

And do you happen to know how Balaam died?

“And they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword...” (Numbers 31:8)

If you follow the teachings of Balaam –

if you take the path of the Nicolaitans –

then you will end in the same place as Balaam –

with the sword of the Son of God between your ribs.

Do *not* turn aside – do not turn away from the way of Christ!

And if you have turned aside,

Repent!!

There is always forgiveness available to the one who repents!

But if you do not repent,

Jesus says, “I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”

Jesus loves his church!

He loves his bride!

And if false teachers corrupt and devalue his bride,

then Jesus will come and *war against them*.

Now, it is true that at the final day,
Jesus will make *all things* right.
But for now, until that day,
Jesus comes in judgment against his church!
When the church acts contrary to the way of her Lord,
when the church prefers the way of earthly power and prestige –
eating food sacrificed to idols, rather than accept the way of the cross –
then Jesus comes in judgment against his church!

Once again – just like with the church in Ephesus –
Jesus says that he will come in judgment against those who refuse to repent.

And like with the church in Ephesus –
Jesus concludes with a promise to the one who conquers –
the one who overcomes –
the one who wins the true victory!

e. “Hear”: The One Who Conquers I Will Bring to the Wedding Feast (v17)

¹⁷ 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.

What will it mean to conquer?

Well, for one, you must refrain from joining the Nicolaitans – the party of Balaam.
But repentance always means more than just “not doing something.”
Repentance includes *both* refraining from evil and doing the good.

What is the good that the church in Pergamum must do?
Stop tolerating the Nicolaitans!
Stop letting the Nicolaitans – the party of Balaam –
continue to prosper in your church – in your city –
in your Christian community.

The church in South Bend is all mixed up.
We need to follow Jesus.
We need to follow the way of the cross –
the way of the one who died and came to life.
Because otherwise, he will come with a sharp two-edged sword
and he will war against his with the sword of his mouth!

But Jesus provides comfort and encouragement!
And there are two things that Jesus promises to the one who conquers:

First, “I will give some of the hidden manna.”

This connects back to the image of eating of the tree of life in 2:7,
and it connects forward to the wedding supper of the lamb.
But the image of manna is especially appropriate for the middle of history.
Manna was what Israel was eating when they were confronted by Balaam.
Plainly, the manna in the wilderness was insufficient.

As we walk in the midst of this age –
surrounded by a crooked and perverse generation,
Jesus promises that he will feed us with the heavenly manna –
with his own body and blood as our spiritual food!

And second, Jesus promises that he will give us a white stone,
with a new name written on the stone that no one knows
except the one who receives it.

The white stone was often used in the ancient world as the symbol of acquittal.
A black stone was used for a “guilty” vote.
A white stone was used for a “not guilty” vote.

As such the white stone is the invitation to the wedding supper of the lamb.
Jesus gives you a white stone with a new name –
as he says in 3:12 to the church of Philadelphia:
“I will write on him the name of my God,
the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem,
which comes down out of heaven from my God,
and my own new name.”

The new name is a mark of membership in the community of the redeemed.
It is the token that grants us entrance into the eternal city of God.
In Isaiah 65:15, God said that he would grant to his servants “another name” –
and in Isaiah 62:2, God promised “you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.”

The new name means a new identity – a new relationship with God –
a new community to which we are joined!

Jesus has been given that new name –
and now *you* have been joined to Jesus –
and so *you* share in his inheritance!