



There's an old hymn called *God Moves In A Mysterious Way*, with these lyrics: **Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread Are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head. Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust Him for His grace; Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.**

I've had many and various conversations with people in our own church family over the months, expressing dark clouds. Maybe personal burdens, but many times they're expressing burdens and concerns about our own church. Maybe hurt relationships or certain things that are happening in ministries. I think it would be accurate to say that in all these conversations, there's a felt sense that something's off. Something's not right and there's a longing for it to be put right.

Now, some of you here might say, "What are you talking about? I don't sense that." If that's you, that may be perfectly fine. But I want to say that I've felt similar things. Something's off, and I don't know what. And a couple weeks ago, when I was at a conference with my dear friend, Thad Barnum, I was hit with the need to pray more *together* with you all. I can't help but wonder if we're noticing symptoms of something, but there's something deeper the Lord wants to reveal – not to crush us, but to grow us.

This is why I mention the hymn. Notice how that third verse begins: Ye fearful saints. . . . Why fear? Because there are rumbling clouds. A storm is coming. And, as with many people, when a storm comes, we take shelter! But what happens when God brings his storm? As another hymn says, "There will be showers of blessings!" I personally am becoming more fully convinced that the Lord is wanting us to lean into the rumblings – not to run. And how do we do this? We begin with a posture of prayerfulness – not only alone, but together (like in Acts 2:42). In the weeks to come, I'll be giving timeframes that I welcome you to join me in prayer here. If you can make it, wonderful. If you can't make it here, maybe you can take time out to pray during the same timeframe. Either way, I pray that we will pray and that we would take fresh courage, not judging the Lord by our temporal senses, but trust him for his grace to pour out. Please consider joining me in this.

And this desire is really at the heart of our King Jesus' summons to the churches of Revelation. The Lord's plan is to always grow us in grace. And so, at times, we are so blinded to our own sins, he confronts – not to cause us to grovel in the dust, but to grow in grace. The question for us is, **Are we listening to the Spirit?** Let anyone who has ears to hear *listen* to what the Spirit says to the churches. Will you listen? Are we listening? The messages of the churches transcend the individual churches and meets us where we are at.

As I think about the messages to the churches, and the call to listen, and as I think about what I'm sensing here for us as Ventura, I'm reminded of when I went to Sierra Leone a year and a half ago. After teaching a group of pastors on how to study the Bible and make application, a pastor called me over to him. He was crying tears of joy, and he said, "I am so blessed. I am so blessed. God has shown me I was wrong. I'm so blessed. I am now going to go to the other pastors I've taught and I'm going to show them

how I've been wrong and then show them the truth I've learned." I sat there in awe. How often do I say, "I'm so blessed God shows me when I'm wrong?" This man wasn't fearing God's condemnation. No. He knew he was a child of God, and as a loving Father, God showed him error so that he could grow! He knew he was blessed. Will we join him in this godly mindset? I pray so. And I pray that we'd pray for this. Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; The clouds [we] so much dread Are big with mercy, and shall break with blessing on [our heads, Ventura]."

With this in mind, let's read about the church in Pergamum: ¹² "Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum: Thus says the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword: ¹³ I know where you live—where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷ "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is inscribed that no one knows except the one who receives it.¹

"Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches." Oh, how I pray we'd listen. There's glory here. There's majesty here. There's infinite and eternal love here. There's the loving Savior and Lord teaching us through the Spirit who is with us. Our Triune God hasn't left us. He's speaking to *us* for our eternal joy! Are we listening? Are you ready?

As we move into this text, I pray that this isn't just a mental exercise to know more information. As the book of Revelation begins, we're told it's a revelation of Jesus. That, I believe, means that it is both a revelation from Jesus and a revelation that emphasizes Jesus' splendor. If we read about these churches and find intriguing tidbits of information and application, and we miss Jesus' glory, we miss *everything*. The words given to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and so on, are revelations of Jesus' glory! And Jesus, in his glory, reveals how he meets the yearnings of all people in their given contexts. Oh, may we be reintroduced to Jesus today and savor him. Take a few moments even now to pray.

Before we talk about the vision of Jesus here, I want to share some background on the city of Pergamum. It was the capital city of Asia Minor. As a result, it carried greater political and also religious weight than the other two cities we've studied so far. This city also was also an important place of worship for four Greek gods: Athena, Asklepios, Dionysos, and Zeus. But, above all of this mythological worship, this city was known for its worship of the emperors. The first temple ever built for an emperor in Asia was in Pergamum in 29 B.C. – dedicated to worship "the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma." (see *Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Ladd, p. 45). This city later built two more temples to other emperors: Trajan and Septimus Severus. Given the emphasis this city put on emperor worship, one commentator wrote, "Elsewhere, Christians were primarily in danger on the one day per year they were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor; in Pergamum they were in danger every day" (MacArthur, *Revelation 1-11*, p. 85).

Here's a city that promised earthly delights and eternal rewards. For the people who didn't believe on Christ, I imagine they thought themselves very privileged to live in such an affluent and powerful city.

¹ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 2:12–17.

What did the Christians think? For us, while there are definitely differences between us and Pergamum, there are also **similarities**. **1) We live in affluence and our cultural mindset is often one of the need to consume more and more because we're never satisfied. 2) It seems as though to me that as our society becomes more secular humanist, people are clinging more to the rulers of government to replace a sense of a divine being. 3) Like in Pergamum, sexual immorality runs rampant not only outside the church, but infiltrates within. 4) While we do not face the intensity of persecution that Pergamum faced, we do see a rise in our society's mindset that tolerance means we must affirm people's choices even if we disagree.** If we do not do this, then many in our society become intolerant. Do you see how we share commonalities with Pergamum? And, as you think about us and what we're facing as Christians, what is your emotional gut response? Fear? Anger? Anxiety? Depression? Let me remind you of the hymn: **Ye Fearful Christians, fresh courage take.** . . . Our Savior gives us words to impel us to greater confidence and hope. Our Savior is telling us how we are overcomers of this world. Instead of feeling like the world is winning, and we will be destroyed unless we fight back, Jesus calls us to another way: a way of freedom in witnessing to his glory both now and in eternity future.

So, what is the message to us? What does the Spirit say? And what are the applications even for us sitting here right now? If your heart is unsettled and you feel and hear the rumblings of thunder both in our church and also as you relate to the world around you, what ought your heart response be? **Let's together focus our attention and affections on Jesus and the feast to come with our Father God!**

1. Let's together focus our attention and affections on Jesus (over and above Satan and the world).

I could just say, "Set your mind on Jesus," but what does that mean? When we go through trials and have difficulties in life, we can get a tainted picture of Jesus in our mind. That's why Jesus reveals specific things about himself to each church. Each vision of himself reminds those churches of who he actually is. So, I want to start by talking about what the Pergamum church was facing. Satan and the world appeared to be wielding more control in Pergamum than Jesus. They could be tempted to think Jesus has lost control. Why? Well, let's reread verses 13-15: ¹³I know where you live—where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.²

Satan is wielding a lot of power in the city. And he's exerting his power not only in the world around them, but also within their own gatherings. Jesus says they live where Satan's throne is. There's clearly not a literal term. It's referring to exerting his power. It's like Pergamum has become a basecamp of Satan's operations in Asia Minor. This community of Christians in Pergamum probably felt like Satan was doing a lot in their town, and Jesus affirms it. This turmoil goes as far reaching as the killing of Christians. Antipas was put to death in Pergamum. And Satan loves to kill, steal, and destroy. He doesn't want faithful witnesses to Jesus. Not only this, but Satan wants the church to be destroyed in Pergamum. He wants Pergamum all for himself.

Jesus knows that even though the people of Pergamum are faithfully proclaiming His name, there are people who are slyly denying him and coming into the church. Jesus says that they are like Balaam. In the

² [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 2:13–15.

book of Numbers, we hear the story of Balaam, where the king of Moab is afraid of Israel and asks Balaam to curse the Israelites. By God's intervention, Balaam is unable to curse the Israelites, but God allows Balak to convince Balak to lure the Israelites to idolatry and sexual immorality. This would snuff out the spiritual life and power of Israel and allow Balak to maintain his control and power.

Jesus says to Pergamum that Balaam's have come in their midst, and then says they hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. This is not an additional group. It's a further clarification. "Nicolaitan" means "overcomer of the people" and "Balaam" means "consume the people." While we do not know much historically about the Nicolaitans, they probably involved themselves in sexual perversion. And, they want to make Christ submissive to the world instead of submitting to Jesus. **Is Pergamum too tired to fight the sin within? Do they see it? Are the battles outside church distracting them from the infection within them?** Will we ask ourselves the same questions for us?

As we consider all of this, imagine how you would respond if you lived in Pergamum? How do you respond living in the USA and all the immorality in our nation? Those of us who can tend more towards anxiety and fear could get ramped up and just focus on all these kinds of problems! We can also say that even Jesus says Satan is behind all of this, but we could also end up losing sight of Jesus and focusing on Satan's work. Jesus is reminding Pergamum to focus their hearts on him. He's reminding us to do the same.

Are we going to allow the Spirit to settle our hearts in Jesus' victory or will we allow ourselves to be focused on Satan's attacks? Ye fearful Christians, fresh courage take. . . . Jesus is victorious over all! Let's read verses 12-13a: ¹² "Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum: Thus says the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword: ¹³ I know where you live. . . ³

Oh, how I pray we'd meditate on these words. While Satan's attacks get a couple verses with explanation of his multiple angles of attack; his "glory" is snuffed out within these few words. Jesus has "A sharp sword came from his mouth, so that he might strike the nations with it. He will rule them with an iron rod."⁴ Jesus is going to judge the nations with His sword. No matter how sinful nations become, Jesus is in control and he will judge them – whether Rome or USA. Amen? Then what do we have to fear?

Not only that, but we who trust Jesus have everything to look forward to. Jesus, the Judge of the Nations, promises eternal rest for us. As Hebrews 13:14 says, **"For we do not have an enduring city here; instead, we seek the one to come."**⁵ Do you really genuinely believe all of this? Do you believe but pray "Lord, help my unbelief." That's me. I believe, but I want to be more resolute in my belief of this! Because it's only in believing Jesus' infinitely superior glory that we will actually not live in fear and we will be faithful witnesses of him in the world. If we believed this, we'd follow even in the footsteps of Antipas who rather died for Christ than to succumb to the temporal pleasures of Pergamum. And Jesus commends him! Oh that we would truly believe the worth of Jesus and reveal that in life or death! Is this your prayer? Is this how you desire to live today in 2024 in Holland, MI? I pray we are praying that Jesus would be our superior hope who anchors us in all the storms of this life.

Jesus reigns over all! Jesus is worthy of all! And here's something so beautiful. With all his glory and power, verse 13 begins with "I know where you live." This isn't just a phrase of acknowledging he is

³ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 2:12–13.

⁴ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 19:15.

⁵ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Heb 13:14.

aware. This is an intimacy of awareness. He knows the suffering. He knows what Satan is doing. He knows it all, and he is not scared one bit. This reminds me of Jesus in the boat in the storm with the disciples. They're scared because they think they will die, but Jesus even confronts them on their fear. If they really knew who Jesus was, they wouldn't be afraid even with the storm raging. So it is with us. The stormclouds are rumbling. We feel it. In our society and some of us even feel it in the church and in our own hearts. Guess what? Jesus knows. And that should be all the comfort we need. This comfort should then compel us to lean in all the more to the Lord. Or, as Jesus states in verse 16: ¹⁶ So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.⁶

Repent is a beautiful relational word of turning towards God instead of being turned away from him. Jesus is saying, "Fearful child, you're staring at Satan and the world. You're living in fear. You're submitting to them. Turn back to me. Submit to me. Run into my arms and find peace and rest and zeal." Do you need to hear these words? But you might notice here that Jesus calls the entire church to repent even though Jesus' accusation is really only against a small group within the church. Why should the entire church repent? Shouldn't it just be the small group? I believe it's because Jesus created the church to be interconnected. As Jesus knows me, so I ought to know the others around me. We cannot be like Cain who said, "Am I my brother's keeper?" So, if I love you and you love me and we love each other, we engage in each other's messes and sins and remind each other to see the superior glory and power of Jesus. Repent. Turn to Jesus' arms. ¹⁷ **"Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches."**⁷ Oh, how I need to hear this, and I'm so thankful Jesus receives me. But Jesus doesn't stop here. Not only do we need to focus our attention and affections on Jesus. We also need to

2. **Let's together focus our attention and affections. . .on the feast to come with our Father God!**

Let's read the remaining words of verse 17: To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is inscribed that no one knows except the one who receives it.⁸

Jesus is Lord. His Kingdom never ends, and Jesus even gives hope to the Pergamum church that they will overcome the Nicolaitans. And so, Jesus motivates his followers with the eternal feast of Heaven. Jesus speaks of the hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name. Now, why do I say feast? Well, think of it this way. If you've ever been invited to a wedding and a reception, especially if you're a man, you're probably thinking, "I wonder what food they'll have." You eventually arrive to the reception and there are table assignments. You then get to the table assignment, and you look for your name for the correct seat. If the wedding has all of this, it's probably going to be a nice meal. This is a small picture of what Jesus is saying here.

The hidden manna refers to food we can't see in the here and now. This seems to allude to when God called Moses to put some manna in the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place. In that place, God's glory was specially revealed and no one but the High Priest could go there once a year to make atonement for the sins of Israel. There was a longing in the Scriptures pointing to a day when people would be able to go straight into the presence of the Lord. This is what Jesus is saying here. The hidden manna will be revealed to you! You will be at the feast with God, eating in his presence. Why? Because Jesus himself was torn on the cross and he took the death you and I deserved. His body was torn and

⁶ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 2:16.

⁷ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 2:17.

⁸ [Christian Standard Bible](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Re 2:17.

then the temple veil was torn so we all could enter the presence of God! Do you believe this? Do you know Jesus? You are an overcomer and anticipate feasting with the Creator God!

And what a special feast this is. But, how do we know that we are invited to this supper? True repentance – turning to Jesus. Jesus himself ensures you'll make it to the feast, Christian. Are you longing for this banquet of the ages? As we arrive, a white stone awaits us. A white stone was an ancient type of ticket of admission into a public festival. The kingdoms of this world has festivals – and not all are bad – but some can be idolatrous like those that Pergamum had. Jesus says to this church that there's a greater festival – one not worth missing. He will ensure that every repenter receives the white stone of entrance! Have you repented? Are you continuing to turn to Christ? Oh, we're going to be celebrating a feast together! But there's more awe. Not only do we await a feast. Not only does God guarantee our entrance. But then we're told on the white stone is a new name.

I'm going to quote C.S. Lewis because I think he captures the idea well. Lewis asked, **“What can be more a man's own than this new name which even in eternity remains a secret between God and him? And what shall we take this secrecy to mean? Surely, that each of the redeemed shall forever know and praise some one aspect of the divine beauty better than any other creature can. Why else were individuals created but that God, loving all infinitely, should love each differently?”** (Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 150-151).

So, Ventura, as we see the rumblings around us outside in the culture and within the church and our own hearts, will we turn to fear and fall under Satan's power and control or will you listen to the Spirit's message here? Do Jesus' words resonate in your heart and is your heart melted and motivated by his astounding power and love? **Let's together focus our attention and affections on Jesus and the feast to come with our Father God!**

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”