

“Listening to the Spirit in Difficulty”

Revelation 2:12-17

Today we continue our journey through the churches of Revelation, and today's church is the church in the city of Pergamum. It was a large seaport of about 100,000 people when the letter was written, about seventy miles northwest of Smyrna, the city we discussed last week. We continue to see themes of struggling in the face of persecution in the church of Pergamum, but we also see some failings of the church in their struggles.

The early Christian churches faced struggles in the fact that their mere existence was a source of persecution. Being a Christian in Pergamum was no different. For example, in Pergamum a temple to Caesar was present, which would have indicated that there was a great following of the state religion in Pergamum and especially adoration for the head of the state religion, which would have been the Roman Emperor. Being a Christian in Pergamum would have meant that you would have rejected all of this and instead have chosen a different path to follow.

Last week we discussed some of the persecution we face as Christians today, for when we live out our faith and when our faith is the unpopular thing to follow in our culture. But we also face persecution in our lives from sources that might not be cultural, but rather personal. The struggle in Pergamum was indeed a cultural struggle, but the struggles we face in our faith life can be personal in

nature, either with other people or within ourselves. They can feel like we are being persecuted ourselves in those situations.

Yet in our struggles, there is no need to give up or start to doubt our faith and walk away from it. In fact, there are clues in the Bible that give us a direction to move in when we feel we are being persecuted in our faith. There is hope in face of difficulty, which is the great theme of the Bible and especially in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation, especially in these seven churches is written so that we can learn and have hope, so that we might live the full and complete life that is found in Jesus Christ.

In this passage of scripture on the church in Pergamum, there is some interesting imagery present that can give us a clue on perhaps some of the experience we can face when looking at faith and personal struggles in our lives. Right in verse 13, we have an image of the church being told they are located where Satan's throne is. What this means, is that there is a temple to the Roman Emperor located in Pergamum. In the struggles given in Revelation Satan is often used to refer to the Roman Emperor, for the Emperor was the head of the system that was persecuting the Christians. The Temple was the physical location of where the evil the Christians faced came from.

Sometimes in our lives though, we may feel that we might live in a place where evil comes at us. I remember in class one time a classmate sharing a story

with the class on his experience as EMT in Louisiana. He was referring to his experience during Hurricane Rita, when he was faced with that horrific storm pounding on his home near Lake Charles. He told us that he believed the storm was the embodiment of evil, the very feeling that the Devil had drawn near the coast and that it was the difficulty they had to face.

As he told this story, you could see the past hardship he faced, and the difficulty he experienced. It became clear to me that in our lives we can live in the place where Satan's throne is, metaphorically speaking. We often face evil in our lives, we often face situations where we feel the enemy is at our doorstep waiting for us to fail. That is the difficulty of being a Christian in the world, is that no matter where we are constantly faced with evil and persecution in our lives, wherever the source might be.

However in this, if we continue through verse 13 where the people of Pergamum are told that they live in the place of Satan's throne we see that they are praised for sticking with their witness of the faith. In the midst of being in a place where there is a symbol of their persecution, the Christians of Pergamum continue to hold strong in the faith and do not allow the difficulties of their situation impede their faith. Even in the face of death, especially in the death of one of their own, Antipas, they hold firm to the faith.

My classmate held firm in his faith when dealing with the storm that hit Louisiana. He found hope in the midst of that evil storm, in song praising God and in the scriptures. He did not let the difficulty of the storm wreak his faith. It might have wreaked his home, but not his faith. Indeed, we can see that there can be persevering hope in the midst of great evil.

Likewise, we must not allow the difficulties we face, wreak the faith that we have. We have been given tools in our struggle against evil in our lives. I believe the two most important tools we have in the face of persecuting evil in our lives come from earnest prayer and scripture. No matter what the evil may look like in your life, be it disease, broken relationships, economic struggles, or any other concern we always have prayer to take our concerns to God who listens and we have the scriptures to guide us in our difficulty. We also have each other to help us to use those tools, which is what we have as Christians. We especially have the Holy Spirit to guide our way, using our tools, and I will explain more on that in a bit. In all, we can use our tools to point us to God to keep our faith strong so that no matter what comes our way we do not have to despair and lose our faith. We do not have to allow persecution in our lives take over, in fact, we can overcome them.

In this, in our struggle against persecution and evil in the world, we must remain on guard against things that might not seem like traps in our faith. If you

continue a little bit further on we can see that the church in Pergamum in their struggles against evil did fall to some of the traps of faith that can happen. For instance, they ate food that was sacrificed to the pagan gods which in Revelation is written as something that can pull you from the path of faith. They also have fallen to some of the teaching of the Nicolaitans, who were the people who tried to fuse Christian ideas with pagan culture. I believe that in all of this, the Christians of Pergamum were not deliberately walking away from the faith. I believe that they were misguided in their way of living out the faith.

In the midst of an environment like Pergamum, where the Emperor is worshipped, it might seem like the right thing to give in a little bit to the culture around you. In the midst of hardship it may seem tempting to give in a little bit, in order to ease the difficulties of the persecution you might face at the moment. It may seem innocent, but that is by no means a good thing, for it can put you on a path that will pull you away from your faith and ultimately harm you more in the end.

I can sympathize in the need for short term relieving of temptation by giving in to the thing that is causing you pain. I'm sure the Christians in Pergamum could sympathize as well, but we are called to a higher way of living. Christ did not teach us to live our lives in such a way to called us to lives him part way, giving in to temptation when it seems necessary. Instead, Christ calls us to turn away from our

sin and evil in our lives and turn to him first and first foremost. It may seem like a good idea to give into temptation, but it is never a good idea.

I think the example I find the most in my life of giving into temptation is the guilty pleasure of buying lottery tickets. Here in Wyoming I don't have to struggle as much with the lottery since we don't have one, but I can still experience the temptation without buying a ticket. Sometimes when I was living in Kansas and Colorado I would sometimes try to find an escape to some of the stress in my life, and go out and buy a lot of lottery tickets in the hope that I would win and escape the troubles I was facing. I falsely believed that by giving away money to something like the lottery I would be free of the troubles. But rather, this was causing more difficulty, because I still had the same problems, but less money in the end. Instead of turning to God for my troubles and trying to find a solution in the Word of God I was turning to a distraction that would not help me in my current situation.

I say this not condemn the lottery, for I do know in states that have a lottery they can fund things like education, but what I am saying is that by sometimes giving into things that promise a distraction don't help in the end. You could experience the same thing by turning to TV or the internet and completely tuning out the world. These things don't help, but keep the problem or persecution present

even more. What can counter these things is turning to God and to the Word, where there you can find true hope and solutions to life's problems.

In our passage from Revelation today, the writer gives us hope in our struggles against hardship and persecution. We can turn from our sin of walking away from troubles and face our situation head on. Even though the letter to church in Pergamum convicts them of giving in to culture, the letter gives hope. The passage tells the Christian in Pergamum to turn away from what they are doing wrong and repent. In their mistakes, there is hope. They can always turn around. Likewise, we can do the same thing, by turning away from whatever sin is pulling us away from our faith and we can be restored.

By turning away from our sin and turning back to Christ, we are not weaker people, we become stronger people in the faith. Rather than be caught in the difficulties of life, of being caught in our persecution we can become stronger in the faith by turning back to God. We are not lesser Christians by turning back to God and admitting the difficulties we face, we become stronger and more in tune with what it means to be a Christian in the world. Yes, the things we face as persecutions might still be there, but we are more confident that we are doing the right thing by turning to God.

In our passage we have one last clue that there is hope in the midst of our difficulty, and that is turning to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our ultimate guide and

hope for when we are down and being caught in persecutions. The letter to Pergamum tells the Christians to “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” This means that the Holy Spirit can give us direction and guidance in facing our troubles. No longer are we caught in the struggle, but we can have spiritual guidance in our difficulty. Not only do we have prayer and scripture, we have the Holy Spirit to guide us in what is right. This is what the letter to Pergamum is about, is that in you can turn from your persecution and let the Holy Spirit guide you, so that you are not caught in the evil in the world. We can be free of our troubles by having faith in Jesus Christ, a faith that points us to God, and a faith that is guided by the Holy Spirit.

Listening to the Spirit in our troubles may seem difficult, but it is there for us. We may face persecutions and evil in our lives ranging from disease, economics, relationships, or cultural ideas, but we have hope in faith. Jesus Christ came into this world to give us strength and a way of living so that we might live forever and ever in him. We do not have to let the world get us down, we have faith in Christ. Christ came into the world giving us a way of life so that we can ultimately rise above persecution and sin and live in a way that glorifies God and gives us new life. The gift of life in Christ is there for all people. Christ is there for all people, so that we might have a new day free of the hardships in this life.

Today, I encourage us to look past our difficulties and temptations and turn to Christ. I encourage us to not give in to temptation, and live in a way that glorifies God, no matter what may come our way. We are not alone in our struggle. The church in Pergamum faced great difficulty, yet they turned to God and Christ and when they struggled, they had the opportunity to redeem themselves. We have the same opportunities today in our lives, so that we might not have to struggle anymore. Let Christ shine in your life, and let the life that comes through a relationship with him shine through forever, Amen.