



LIVING IN THE CLEAR

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The Pony Express has become part of the folklore of the Old West. It only functioned for about a year and a half in the early 1860s, but it made a permanent stamp on American history. By using riders and horses that worked in stages, the Pony Express could get mail from the East Coast to the West Coast in a record 10 days time. It was an incredible achievement.

The riders of the Pony Express captured the imagination of the country. You can see why in an ad that ran in California: "Wanted. Young, skinny, wiry fellows. Not over 18. Must be expert riders. Willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred." They made \$25 a week. Most of them were around 20. The youngest was 11. They could not weigh more than 125 lbs., and they were only allowed to take along some water, a horn to let the next stationmaster know they were coming, two guns to ward off bandits, and a Bible.

There was a bit of wild insanity to the whole idea, so the Pony Express riders became the stuff of legends. But on a practical and less interesting level, what was more important than anything was the mochila, or mail pouch that carried bundles of letters. That was the reason there were riders in the first place. Everything else was secondary. The employers often said that if it came down to it, the horse and rider should perish before the mochila. And yet today, the content of all those letters has been long forgotten. None of it was nearly as exciting as the death-defying adventures of the riders themselves.

Revelation, is kind of the Pony Express of the Bible. It captures our imagination with its wild tales and colorful imagery. We are fascinated by all the drama. But we can't overlook the most important detail, which is that Revelation is carrying an urgent message. In fact, like those pony riders, it is delivering actual letters which are from Jesus himself. And it is the content of those letters that matters far more than the delivery system. We cannot lose sight of that in the middle of everything else.

We're on our third week of looking at the seven letters to the seven churches. Our premise is that the messages they contain are essential truths for the Christian life. If we want to be all in, all out and all up for God, we will need to take to heart what Jesus said to these churches.

We first looked at the letter to the church in Ephesus, where Jesus called them back to love. Everything we do needs to be the overflow of our love for God and each other.

The second letter was to Smyrna, and the theme of that letter was courage. Jesus gave them firm convictions to stand on in the face of overwhelming fears. We pointed out that we can face the same sorts of fears on a daily basis, and living for Christ requires courage to not let those fears determine who we are.

This morning we turn our attention to the third letter. Jesus is dictating the letter to John, and he says this:

Revelation 2:12-17

"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.

There's an old joke about a new inmate who came into a prison. One day he's out in the yard with all these lifers. One of them yells, "117!" and everybody laughs. The new guy thought that was a little strange, and felt a little out of it. Then a little while later, somebody else said, "675!" and all the other prisoners cracked up. This went on for a while, and finally the new guy asked an old timer, "What's with the numbers? I don't get it."

The old guy handed him a book and said, "These are all the jokes we all know. We wrote them down in here and numbered them 1 to 1000. We all know them so well now that all anybody has to do is yell out a number and we all laugh, because everybody knows the punch line."

So over the next few days the new guy worked really hard to memorize the book. He was feeling pretty confident, so the next time they were all out in the yard, he yelled, "Hey guys – 423!" Complete silence. Nobody laughed. The old timer shook his head and said, "Dude – it's all in the delivery."

Sometimes reading the Bible can feel like it's using all insidery language that you don't understand. This letter to Pergamum sounds like it's practically in code. There are all these strange names – Antipas, Balaam, Balak, Nicolaitans. And then there are these

symbols – a double edged sword, hidden manna, a white stone. Maybe everyone else seems to get it, but you're feeling confused and uninspired.

What is going on here? In order to understand it, we need to take some time to go through it line by line and explore the background behind the text. Let's start at the top and work our way through.

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

We saw this imagery earlier in John's vision. Jesus had a sword coming out of his mouth. That sword represents his word that is so true and sharp that it pierces right to the heart of the matter.

But in addition to being sharp, the sword is double edged. That means it cuts more than one way. Hearing a word from Jesus can be both comforting and confronting, and that's what it was for the church in Pergamum. There was positive and there was negative.

That's really good to remember when we say we need a word from the Lord. Because his word cuts whatever it needs to. While it is just what we need when we are being attacked, it also slices through our false defenses and exposes things about us we didn't expect it to.

Christ begins with the comfort side of the sword for Pergamum:

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.

That's a pretty dismal description of this town. Pergamum was sin city. It was headquarters for the devil, a hellish place for the church to try and exist. It was recognized as the official center of emperor worship, which is probably why Jesus identified it as Satan's seat of power. But in addition to that, it was filled with temples to many pagan gods, such as Athena, Asclepius and Zeus.

In spite of being in such a dark place, Jesus says this church had been true to his name. We don't know much about the person named Antipas who became the first martyr of the city. Tradition says he was roasted alive in a big pot. Whatever the case, it was an extremely hostile environment for living out your faith.

You might expect that Jesus would tell them, "Get out! That's no place for a Christian to live!" But he doesn't say that. Instead he affirms the fact that they've been true to him, and he encourages them to hang in there.

I think that's what makes this letter so important for where we are today. We live in a time and place where it is not easy to maintain a witness for Christ. When the culture around us promotes such different values, it can be discouraging to stand up for Jesus.

The darkness around us can be so oppressive that we just want to escape and find someplace less evil.

There are certainly times where we are called to flee temptation. There are places we need to leave to be smart. But we're never asked to exit out of fear. And tragically, fear is what drives many Christians to pull out of being involved in the public arena – the fear of being contaminated by their surroundings. Fear of being chewed up and spit out by the machine. Fear of exposure to evil. Fear of not making enough difference for God in such a hardened place. But there's no need for fear. If Christians can thrive in a city that's called Satan's throne room, we can know for sure that Christ can sustain us in our world as well. He can because he lived it – staying absolutely holy while rubbing shoulders with the most sinful when he came to earth.

Nothing demonstrates that incarnation --that God in the flesh -- better than when we find a way to follow his example.

It's not easy. The church in Pergamum, as strong as it was, still had some very serious challenges it was facing. Jesus tells them,

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.

You may remember stories about Balaam, but if not, let me fill you in on the main points. Balaam was a prophet in the Old Testament, when the Israelites were making their way to the Promised Land. The king of Moab hired Balaam to put a curse on the nation of Israel who was passing through his land, and God kept preventing him from doing it. Every time Balaam opened his mouth, a blessing came out instead. So the king of Moab was frustrated, but Balaam was like, "Hey – I can't help it. These are the words God is giving me."

However, Balaam really liked the money he was making, and he wanted to make the king happy, so he gave the Moabites a back door method for beating Israel. If God was protecting them so powerfully, then you needed to find a way to create a wedge between them and God. What better way to do that than to tempt the people to turn away from God and follow Moab's gods?

So Balaam deviously encouraged the Moabites to seduce the Israelites. Here's what happened:

Numbers 25:1-3

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 and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

Balaam's strategy worked. The king of Moab didn't need a curse after all. Seducing the Israelites was just as effective of a way to weaken them. The people start fooling around, they start eating the food sacrificed to idols and the next thing you know, they're worshipping Moab's god Baal.

Jump forward now to Pergamum, and Jesus says he is seeing the same pattern in the church there. Some of the people are falling into the exact same trap set by Balaam, eating food sacrificed to idols, and thinking sexual immorality is no big deal.

This was not just a problem in Pergamum. All the Gentile-based churches were wrestling with the same issues. What does it look like to be a Christian in a pagan environment?

When Paul was in the city of Antioch, a big debate arose over what was expected of non-Jewish Christians. Up until then, the vast majority of people choosing to follow Christ had come from a Jewish background, so they were used to living with all the rules of Judaism. Their assumption was that as Gentiles started coming to Christ, they would adopt all the same laws as their own, just as if they had converted to Judaism. Paul said no – the whole point of Jesus coming was to be the way we're made right with God. It isn't through rule following, because not even Israel was able to do that. So this argument broke out over what to require of the new Christians, and it became so heated that Paul went up to Jerusalem to let the apostles have the final word. So they convened a council and drafted a letter back to the church at Antioch that agreed with Paul.

Acts 15:28-29

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.

This passage is remarkable to me, because things could have gone so differently. The apostles could easily have singled out any number of commands and made Christianity all about rules. But they amazingly kept their instructions to a bare minimum: Don't eat that food sacrificed to idols, and don't mess around sexually. It is the exact same pairing that Jesus was concerned about.

So the question becomes, "Why these two?" Why are these the markers that were threatening to undo the church at Pergamum?

In modern day America, we scratch our heads a bit at the whole concept of eating food sacrificed to idols. We really have no similar frame of reference to compare it to. But it was a daily reality in the first century. If you were invited to some sort of public gathering where food was involved, chances were good that the barbecued ribs had been offered to some god prior to the meal.

The same was true when you went to a friend's house. Plutarch, the Greek historian who lived during the same time Revelation was written, left a note about a private dinner party he attended. He says,

Ariston's cook made a hit with the dinner guests, not only because of his general skill, but because the rooster he set before the diners, though it had just been slaughtered as a sacrifice to Heracles, was as tender as if it had been a day old.

This was their world. Everywhere you turned, somebody was doing something to try and satisfy a god somewhere, trying to appease them and meet their needs with a food offering. Even when you went to the local butcher shop to buy your next pot roast, there was a good chance the meat you were buying had already been designated as an idol's.

Now the rationalization for some Christians was that since idols aren't real, there was no real harm in going to feasts in the temple of another God. Being there doesn't mean you really believe in those gods – you're just there for the social life. But they were missing the point.

You sometimes hear people talk about gateway drugs – how they started with one thing and that opened the door to something else. The Christians in Pergamum were eating gateway dinners – meals that were opening up their hearts to outside influences. They might not have started out believing in the other gods, but it was a flirtation that had the potential to end up winning their allegiance.

Flirtation is the right word, because the Bible equates idol worship with cheating on God. It's like having a spiritual affair, giving your heart away to something or someone other than God.

When you put it in these terms, there all kinds of “gateway dinners” we're invited to. The fact that there aren't any physical idols only makes it that much easier for us to be seduced. Anything that pulls our attention away from God has the potential to become that food sacrificed to idols. John Eldredge once wrote:

...if Christianity does not take your breath away, something else will... God calls sin adultery of the heart. It is what you give your heart away to other than the heart of God.

I would expand on that to say that if something else IS taking your breath away right now, it can only eventually take you to one of two places: boredom or bondage. Either you will tire of it and get bored, or it will take over your life and no longer be a pleasure but an addiction. Our hearts were designed to be God's alone, and nothing else can ultimately satisfy in a healthy way.

What is your gateway dinner right now? What is on your plate that looks absolutely innocent and yet could have the power to divert your love and attention from God?

If food sacrificed to idols represents spiritual cheating, you can see why sexual immorality would also bother God. And it was everywhere in Greek and Roman culture. The Christians in Pergamum lived in a society that didn't understand the Christian commitment to monogamy. It made no sense to them.

But when you understand that one of God's core characteristics is his faithfulness, it makes perfect sense that he would want his people's lives to reflect that. At its ideal, Christian marriage is supposed to picture Christ's love for his church. It is a love that is single-minded, undistractable and completely trustworthy. So any time that image is altered, damaged or destroyed, it makes the picture harder to see.

For the first Christians who had a Jewish background, sexual purity was an easy concept to grasp. It was in their teaching already. But for the Gentile Christians converting from paganism, it was totally new. And some of them had not made the connection between their spiritual beliefs and their physical actions. That's why Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and said,

1 Corinthians 6:18-20

Run away from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. Or don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, 20 for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.

In case you hadn't guessed it, the word I've chosen for this letter is purity. God wants our love. He wants to give us courage. But he also places a high value on purity. There is probably no point in our society today where Christian values stand in starker contrast to the world around us. The volume of sexual temptation and sexual activity outside the boundaries of marriage makes the Christian view seem completely old fashioned and obsolete. The only comforting thing about the Pergamum story is knowing that some things have always been the same. God's idea for sex has never been the same as humanity's.

Beyond that, both of these issues – eating food sacrificed to idols and immorality – both of them point to what we often forget. Our bodies matter to God. What we do with our bodies matters to God. It is not an acceptable form of Christianity to say, "I believe in my heart" and then do whatever you want. Jesus wants all of you.

When we think of purity, we think of what we're keeping out or removing. We think about impurities being filtered out. But another way to think about purity is strength. If there's a tank of pure oxygen, it means it's a concentrated form of it. It's undiluted. It's a measure of strength. To live in the clear is to live in a way that is focused and intentional, unmuddied by distractions.

When we talk about purity for ourselves, we can't just think about it in terms of the impurities we filter out – we also have to think about the strength of what remains. Kierkegaard said, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

That's what God wants. He wants us to be 100% purely his. All of us devoted to him. Not that any of us are there, but that is the direction.

I want to stop here a minute because I'm sure that I lost some of you when I brought up the whole idea of sexual purity. You shut down at that point because you're saying to yourself, “Well, that's not me. I've already messed up there.” Maybe you are struggling with shame or guilt because of things you've done. Maybe you feel like you've ruined that picture we talked about.

If you think this isn't for you, than you need to hear the letter again. Because Jesus was writing this to people who had messed up. His audience was full of people who had regrets. That's EXACTLY who it was written for. And what does he say to them? First, he invites them to just stop and turn around, right where they are. He uses that same word “Repent” that we saw in the first letter.

If there is impurity that is happening in your life right now, turn around and get out. Today. Don't use the excuse that it's too late as permission to keep going down the same path. And if you find you've already given your heart away to something or someone other than God, it's not too late. You're not stuck, you're not in an irreversible spot. Stop what you're doing and head the other way.

When you do, Jesus says two things:

To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna.

To the person who gets past their past, he will give some of the hidden manna. Manna was that mysterious bread from heaven that fed the Israelites in the desert where there was no other food. So here again, we've got food being talked about in this letter. This is God's substitute for the food being sacrificed to idols. Instead of people offering food to satisfy the gods, this is God offering food to satisfy us. And in the book of John, Jesus tells us that he himself is that manna.

God's promise is that as we give our hearts to him, as we make ourselves exclusively his, we're not going to wish we had something else. He's plenty for us. He will sustain us where there's nothing else to sustain us.

If you remember when God gave the people manna in the wilderness, it was a daily event. You couldn't try to hoard it overnight, or it would spoil. There was this need to depend on God every single day.

You may be looking ahead and thinking, “There is no way I can commit to purity of my heart and mind and body for the rest of my life. I don't have that kind of strength or

willpower.” And you’re right. You don’t. But Jesus is our manna. He is our daily supply. And he will give us strength enough for the day that is in front of us. And every day we keep coming back to him, he will give us what we need. But it is a daily, ongoing choice to depend on him.

Secondly, he says this:

I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

White stones had a few different uses in Roman society. Juries would often be given two stones to cast their votes in a trial. One was black, and one was white. If they believed the person was guilty, they would toss in a black stone. And if they thought the person was innocent, they would put in a white stone, symbolizing that the person’s slate was clean. White was a verdict of not-guilty.

There was a second way white stones were used, and that was as a reward to the athletes competing in the games for each city. Winners of the games were given a white stone with their name inscribed on it. That stone entitled them to be supported by the city for the rest of their life. It was a promise that they would be cared for.

A third way white stones were used was as something called tesserae hospitales. If we were friends in the ancient Roman world, I might choose to give you a white stone with my name on it, and you would do the same. That stone was proof that you were always welcome at my house and that we were friends.

All three of those meanings come through in Jesus saying he will give us a white stone with our name on it. Although we may have a history of failure, when we come to Christ, he casts his white stone for us, declaring us not guilty anymore. He gives us victory over our sins, and promises to take care of us forever. And most importantly, he calls us his friends and says that we are welcome in his home. We have the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that there is a place for us.

Any way you look at it, the whiteness of the stone shows how Jesus restores our purity. We can have a new, clean start with Jesus. No matter where we’ve been, we can be restored. And it has a new name for us on it, because Jesus gives us our true identity.

The book and movie *Ironweed* tells the story of the homeless man Francis Phelan. Francis is outside on a cold night with his other homeless friend, Rudy. They stumble across the body of an Indian woman who has passed out drunk in the snow. She’s totally wasted. They go over and try to come to her aid. As they’re doing their best to lift her out of the snow, they start talking about who she is, and Rudy says to Francis,

"She’s been a bum all her life."

"No, nobody’s a bum all their life...She had to do something before she was a bum."

"Well, she was a whore, in Alaska."

"What about before that?"

"I don't know... I guess before that she was just a little kid..."

"Well, that's something. Being a little kid is something. It's not a bum and it's not a whore." And then they carried her inside.

We look at ourselves and see people who have messed up their lives and made terrible mistakes. Jesus looks at us and says, "That's not what you always were. Before that. And before the mistakes before that. You were a kid. Even before you were born, you were my child. That's who you were meant to be. And that's what you can be again." That's something. It's the main thing that defines us. We're no longer labeled by what we've done or where we've fallen or how many times we've failed – we're defined by being his. He gives us his new name.

Christ offers all this to those who overcome. So the question we face this morning is, what do I need to overcome? Are there some of those gateway dinners I've been choosing to participate in? What dangerous flirtation could distract me from God? If Christ doesn't take our breath away, something else will.

And am I viewing the whole of my life – body, soul and spirit – as Christ's? We can't compartmentalize our faith. Our lives, our actions matter to God as much as what we say we believe.

We may have messed up. We will mess up. But this letter is for us. We can be restored to our true, full selves, who we were meant to be. We can find the strength to overcome with the daily manna he gives us. There is a white stone waiting with our name on it.

God give us ears to hear and grace to overcome and the desire to live in the clear.