

The Deception of Balaam

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. It's good to be here with you. I'm wearing a mask today because I'm sick. And I thought I was totally fine until after the baptism class. I must have been running on adrenaline.
- I just kind of crashed right after and was in bed all afternoon and evening. So I'm sorry if I exposed some of you guys to the baptism class.
- Hopefully you guys don't get sick. I did test negative for COVID. And I think I'm far enough away from you guys that I don't have to wear a mask right now. But I will wear a mask when I'm doing communion later.
- So if you would turn with me in your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2. We're in verses 12 to 17, the letter to the church, to the angel of the church in Pergamum.
- And let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's word. Father, give me strength this morning to proclaim your word.
- [1 : 0 6] And may your word, which pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, pierce our hearts. Mark us. Mark us.
- Seal us indelibly with the name of Jesus Christ. And help us to remember what privilege that is, the joy that is.
- As we go through this passage together. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. If you are willing and able, please stand for the reading of God's word from Revelation 2, 12 to 17.
- And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.
- I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name. And you did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.
- [2 : 1 4] 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.
- So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.
- 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.
- This is God's holy and authoritative word. You may be seated. The 12th century historical fiction written by Geoffrey of Monmouth called History of the Kings of Britain is one of the earliest to tell the legend of King Arthur.
- And there are many works of European literature that tell the story of Arthur, and they vary in their details. So don't hackle me if my details don't fit yours.

[3 : 28] But one common motif is of a young earther coming into possession of his famous sword, Excalibur. And the work entitled Prose Merlin claims that Excalibur was planted in an anvil, planted in an iron anvil that was sitting on top of a stone, and it was planted through both the anvil and the stone.

So obviously that's supposed to communicate how powerful the sword this is, sharp and durable it is. And it says, the legend said that, whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil is rightwise king born of all England.

Arthur pulls out the sword with ease, which no one else could pull out, and thereby proves his kingship of Britain, that the kingship rightly belongs to him. And there are many legends that tell the story of this powerful magical sword, and this is historical fiction, so keep that in mind.

The dream of Ronneby says that Arthur's sword had a design of two chimeras on the golden hilt. A chimera is from Greek mythology, and it's a fire-breathing monster that's part lion, part goat, and part dragon.

And the legend says that whenever Arthur unsheathed his sword, that actual flames of fire emanated from the chimera's mouth. Another account says that the Excalibur, when drawn in combat, the blade shone so brightly, like the light of 30 torches, like the blazing sun, so it's to blind the eyes of the enemies.

[4 : 52] It is reminiscent of the glorious risen Jesus, from whose mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword, whose eyes are like a flame of fire, and whose face is like the sun shining in full strength, as was described in the vision of Jesus in Revelation 1.

But imagine if a sword like Excalibur really existed, that can slice through iron anvils and rocks like a knife through butter. A sword with which you can rout your enemies and conquer the nations.

A sword is a symbol of authority, and of power, and of judgment. And we see that plainly in Romans 13, verse 4, when it describes the governing authorities who bear the sword in order to be, quote, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

And Jesus introduces himself in this letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum, in verse 12, as the one who has the sharp two-edged sword, because he's trying to communicate his authority, and his power, and his judgment, because it's only when we view Christ in this glorious light, as the king and judge of all, that we will remain faithful and refuse to compromise with the sinful world.

That's the main point of our passage today. Remembering the sword of Christ's judgment, we must repent of tolerating false teaching that promotes religious and moral compromise.

[6 : 18] And I'm going to talk about that in three parts. First, we'll talk about the two-edged sword of Christ, and then secondly, about the two holes of the church in Pergamum. And then third, two gifts for those who conquer.

First, let's talk about the two-edged sword of Christ. It says in verse 2, the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. When you hear two-edged sword, some of you who are steeped in fantasy literature or video games or whatnot might think of a two-bladed sword that has like a hilt in the middle and has a blade coming out of one end, another blade coming out of the other end, kind of like Darth Maul in Star Wars Episode I.

But that's not what a two-edged sword means. That's the two-bladed sword. That's actually, there's almost no historical evidence that such swords are ever used in combat because it's very impractical.

Like you'll kill yourself using it, and you also lose a lot of leverage if you're doing this instead of having this. So that's just fantasy. The two-edged sword is sharpened on both edges of the blade.

So this edge and this edge. So unlike some single-edge blades like a katana, Japanese katana, which is dull on one end and sharp on the other, this is a two-edged sword that's sharp on both ends like the Roman gladius, which is a type of sword, a double-edged sword that the Roman soldiers use around the time that Revelation was written.

[7 : 47] And that's actually where you get the word gladiator. They literally mean swordsman. They bear the gladius, which is the sword. And so this two-edged sword, there's some advantages and disadvantages, but the main advantage of a two-edged sword is that it has greater thrusting and piercing power more than a single-edged sword because two edges are sharp, and the enemies can't grab hold of your blade from the dull edge, whatnot.

It's a powerful weapon. There's no dull section on the two edges of the sword. It's described in verse 2 as sharp, able to cut down God's foes with devastating force.

And the sharp two-edged sword here is a reminder of Christ's authority to judge and punish evildoers. We can see this clearly in verse 16 where Christ says concerning the Nicolaitans, therefore repent.

If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. The sword is an instrument of war with which Jesus brings down God's judgment upon the false teachers and those who follow their teaching.

Revelation 19.15 confirms this. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, that is the nations who are in rebellion against God and his Christ. So if you reject the gospel of Jesus Christ and refuse to follow him, then you're not just saying, well, that works for you, this works for me, but it's not for me.

[9 : 13] So you do you and I'll do me. No, you're actually declaring war against Jesus when you refuse to follow him. If you take an agnostic stance and refuse to make a commitment to Jesus, saying, well, I just don't have enough data.

So I'm gonna refrain from forming a judgment. I'm not rejecting Jesus. I'm just withholding judgment. I'm undecided. You are actually taking a stance against Jesus because Jesus says that there is no neutral ground in this spiritual war.

You're either with him or you're against him. It says in Matthew 12.30, whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. And so if you have not identified with Jesus and you have not gathered with him under his banner, then you face the fearful judgment of the one who has the sharp two-edged sword.

Have you gathered with the people of God? Are you counted among their number? If not, you must repent. Repent of your sins. Put your faith in Jesus.

At the end of the world, those who reject Jesus and refuse to repent of their sins will not merely cease to exist. They will face the fearful judgment of the one who has the sharp two-edged sword.

[10 : 34] As you probably already figured by now, this is not a literal sword. Jesus doesn't have a physical two-edged sword protruding out of his mouth. But the reason why it is described as the sword of his mouth in verse 16 and described as coming from his mouth in verse 16 as well is that the sword is a symbolic representation of the word of God.

We know from Ephesians 6.17 that the word of God is the sword of the Spirit. This is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 11.4, which said that the Messiah would judge the world with the rod of his mouth.

It's hard for us to imagine were someone's word or breath having such awesome power. But that is the case when it comes to God.

Remember how God created the world in Psalm 33.6, By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made. And by the breath of his mouth, all their host. This is what the linguists define as the performative word versus the constitutive word.

When you say certain things, you're not just giving information, you're actually making something happen. So on your wedding day, when you say, I do, you're not just saying, giving information, saying that I give, I consent to this thing.

[11 : 51] No, you are actually consenting to it and taking a vow and committing to that. You're performing an act by saying something. So some of the words that we speak as human beings are constitutive.

Some of the words we say are performative. But the key distinction is that in order to speak performative words, you have to have the authority to do that. You have to have the proper authority to enact such actions.

So if you're just a random bystander and then you come to a man and a woman and then you say, I therefore pronounce you husband and wife, like nothing happens. You're not married, right? It has to be someone who has a rightful authority to do that, right?

But with God, because he has all authority in heaven and on earth, whenever God says anything, it's always decretive and performative.

It accomplishes what it set out to do. So when God says, let there be light, light is created out of nothing. It says in Psalm 107:20, he sent out his word and he healed them and delivered them from their destruction.

[13 : 00] When God pronounces healing, there's healing. When God pronounces salvation, there's salvation. And like us with that same powerful word, when God judges and pronounces death, pronounces destruction, that happens.

That's the awesome power of the sword of his mouth and there's no evading that sword. Isaiah 55, 10 to 11 says, for as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there, but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. That is God's word.

Hebrews 4, 12 says, living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit and of joints and of marrow and discerning the thoughts and the intentions of the heart.

That's the awesome power of the sword of the mouth of Jesus Christ. When I was a kid, my dream always was to grow up and become a soldier.

[14 : 16] And whenever my kindergarten or elementary school teachers would ask, hey, what was your dream job as you get older? It was always, I want to be a soldier. It was an odd dream to have because in Korea, there is mandatory military service for men and it's something that most people try to avoid, right?

They find excuses to avoid. And I think, I mean, that didn't come true in a literal sense. I don't fight physical battles, but I think it's come true in a spiritual sense because whenever I stand here on the pulpit with God's word in my hand, I do believe that I am not just saying words.

I'm wielding the sword of God himself, the sword of the spirit that cuts through the division of spirit and soul. So when you also are ministering God's word to other people in relationships, in your conversations, you're not merely talking.

When you faithfully proclaim God's word and apply it to people's lives, you are a swordsman and a swordswoman of the Lord God himself. You're not merely spitting out words.

You are wielding powerfully the heart piercing and the thoughts discerning, the wicked crushing, the devil slaying, and sinners saving, and dead resurrecting word of the living God.

[15 : 56] So don't be a soldier who's caught without his sword by his side. Meditate on it day and night.

Store up God's word in your heart so that you might not sin against him. That's your sword. And following the pattern that we've noticed so far in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, chapters two and three, the way Jesus identifies himself and introduces himself is deeply connected to the condition of the church.

The church in Pergamum are tolerating false permissive teaching that condones idolatry and sexual immorality. So Jesus identifies himself with the fearsome sword of his mouth.

But before Jesus critiques the church in Pergamum, he first commends them in verse 13. I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is, yet you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you where Satan dwells.

Jesus notes twice the fact that the believers dwell, these believers, where Satan dwells, where Satan's throne is. Satan has the throne which suggests that he is ruling over something.

[17 : 21] His rule is subordinate to God's ultimate sovereignty and rule and Satan can only act within the boundaries that God places around him as you can see in Job chapters 1 and 2.

Nevertheless, Satan does exercise influence and power over the unbelieving world, which is why in Ephesians 2, it describes the devil as the prince of the power of the air who is at work, now at work, in the sons of disobedience.

The gospel of John often refers to Satan as the ruler of this world, meaning the sinful world. And the church in Pergamum dwelled at the epicenter, the ground zero of Satan's destructive rule.

This could be an allusion to several historical realities. Remember how Smyrna had boasted about having built the first temple dedicated to Rome? Now, Pergamum had a similar claim.

They were the first city in Asia Minor to build a temple to a Roman ruler, a temple dedicated to the Augustus. So it served as a capital for the emperor cult, the worship of Caesar.

[18 : 29] And the city proudly designated itself the temple warden, the keeper of the temple for Caesar worship. In addition to the emperor cult, Pergamum was also center of thriving, other thriving pagan cults, like the cult of Asclepius.

He is the serpent god of healing. His symbol is the serpent. And it was, that serpent emblem might be why John's referencing Satan's throne.

But either way, we can't know what the exact historical referent is for the throne of Satan. We know that Satan's influence and authority were powerful in the city of Pergamum because that's where Satan dwells.

And they would have faced, the believers in Pergamum would have faced tremendous political pressure and religious persecution because most Greek cities require citizens to make sacrifices to the Roman gods and to pay homage and worship to the Roman emperor.

Now this background makes Jesus' commendation of the church in Pergamum all the more amazing. Jesus says, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And yet, you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you where Satan dwells.

[19 : 54] So one of their own church members named Antipas was killed in Pergamum for his faithful allegiance to Jesus Christ. Imagine one of our own church members being killed by the governing authorities for their faith in Jesus.

Would we scatter in fear? Then? Would only a few return for the service the following week? Will we deny our faith?

It says, the church in Pergamum held fast to the name of Jesus and did not deny the faith. They locked arms together and endured the blowback of persecution.

And they had done what Jesus commanded the church in Samaritan to do in the previous passage, be faithful unto death. And they did this despite the fact that they dwell where Satan dwells.

Notice the repetition of that idea in verse 13. First, Jesus says, I know where you dwell. And then he ends by saying, where Satan dwells. This contrast between the two clauses conveys a sense of conflict and opposition between those who serve Christ's throne and those who serve Satan's throne.

[21 : 21] They are not to compromise or commingle. people. I want to read an extended passage from 2 Corinthians 6, 14 to 18. I think we have that to show you. It says, do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said, I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Therefore, go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing, then I will welcome you and I will be a father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.

Christians often use this passage to teach that Christians should not marry non-Christians, which is a fine application, but in its original context, this passage has more general, far-reaching applications.

[22 : 28] I think 1 Corinthians 6.39 is an even better verse for that because it speaks of marrying only in the Lord. This passage is more general in that we dwell where Satan dwells, but light cannot have fellowship with darkness.

Righteousness cannot have partnership with lawlessness. In what ways have we, as professing believers, failed to separate ourselves from the sinful world?

In what ways have we commingled and compromised with the world, uncritically accepting the world's values and priorities as our own? Have we forgotten that God himself, the Holy One, dwells among us?

He walks among us as our God. Have we, by our unholy activities and associations, sold, the name of Christ and brought him into contact with the contaminating worship of Belial and with the idols?

I'm not saying that Christians should have nothing to do with the world or with unbelievers. If we did, then we wouldn't be able to love our neighbors as we love ourselves like Jesus commanded us to do, but Christians are to be distinct, set apart.

[23 : 43] It's what it means to be holy. Christians and non-Christians in some ways should be like oil and water that don't mix. They're in the same container.

They dwell in the same place, but because water is, you guys are some chemists out here, polar molecule, right? Yeah, that's right. Bailey gives me a thumbs up. And while oil is non-polar, they cannot mix.

Unfortunately, the church in Pergamum had begun to descend down the steps of compromise with idolatrous and immoral world, and we can see that in Jesus' critique in verses 14 to 15.

But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put some stumbling block before the sons of Israel so that they might eat food, sacrifice the idols, and practice sexual immorality.

So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. This brings me to my second point, the two holds of the church in Pergamum. The church in Pergamum did hold to the name of Jesus, but they also were holding on, sadly, to the teachings of Balaam and the teachings of the Nicolaitans.

[24 : 54] They were holding on to two things at the same time. Those are two exact same words in the Greek. Limping between two opinions like Israelites of old. They had some within their congregation who were holding the teaching of Balaam, which is parallel to holding the teaching of Nicolaitans.

I think they're referring to one and the same thing. I think John is trying to explain what the teaching of Nicolaitans is like by comparing it to the Old Testament equivalent, which was the teaching of Balaam.

Balaam was a seer, kind of like a prophet, but he was not God's prophet. He was a seer, but he did hear from the Lord and God did speak to him in some ways.

He was a seer that was hired by Balak, Balak, king of Moab, and he was hired to curse the nation of Israel in Numbers chapters 22 to 24.

Israel had been journeying through the wilderness and they demanded passage from the Amorites so that they could get to the land that God had promised to them, but the Amorites refused to grant them passage and instead came out to war against the Israelites and God helped and assisted the Israelites so they defeated the Amorites and now they're on the edge of Moabite territory and here are the Moabites and Balak, king of Moab, looking out upon the vast population of Israel right on their door, right at their door and they're scared.

[26 : 15] He says that they had, were filled with dread and great dread of Israel and overcome with fear of them and so Balak is a sly king and he says, well, you know, I don't think it's smart to fight them in war.

I'm gonna hire this seer to curse them and so he hires Balaam to curse them three times but Balaam protests, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord to do either good or bad of my own will.

What the Lord speaks, that I will speak. So Balaam is here recognizing that he actually has no power in and of himself to bless or curse anybody. It only happens if God does it and so he's saying that I can't curse them if God's saying bless them and so instead of cursing them three times, Balaam ends up blessing them which is amazing.

So this is something that I think you should have great confidence about as God's people because nowadays a lot of people are into witchcraft and sorcery and other things and it doesn't matter how many times or how, what powerful witches try to put hexes on you or curse you, it will have zero effect upon the people of God because only when God blesses are you blessed and only when God curses are you cursed.

As God told Abraham in Genesis 12, 3, I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So, then what's wrong with what Balaam did?

[27 : 47] He blessed God's people three times. See, that wasn't the end of the story. Balaam was a sly one. He realized that he was powerless to curse the Israelites but he really still wanted the riches that King Balak was offering him.

I really want my payday but I can't curse them. And so, he came up with a crafty plan because he was, as 2 Peter 2.15 calls him, he was a man who loved gain from wrongdoing.

So, he decided that he'd try a different tact and in Numbers 31.16 Moses mentions that on Balaam, Balaam's advice, some Moabite woman caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor.

And so, the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. The incident of Peor is told in Numbers 25 where it says that when Israel was living in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab and these invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods and the people ate and bowed down to their gods so Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

So, Balaam could not curse the Israelites directly but he came up with a plan to make them bring upon the curse of God upon themselves through their idolatry and sexual immorality. He advised these Moabite women to go and seduce the Israelites and lead them astray into idolatrous worship.

[29 : 16] that's what the Nicolaitans were doing to the church in Pergamum. They weren't trying to convert Christians back to paganism.

Remember, these are Christians in Pergamum like Antipas who were faithful unto death. They're willing to die to hold fast the name of Jesus. They're not going to be just reject Jesus and go and follow the idols.

No, but instead of that they tried a different tack more subtle form of compromise with idolatry and sexual immorality. They were teaching the church in Pergamum that they can eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

Now, this is not speaking of eating food that was once sacrificed to an idol but is now being sold in the marketplace. Paul tells us that we can eat that with a clear conscience in 1 Corinthians 8 but in 1 Corinthians 10 Paul himself warns about actually partaking in the sacrifices themselves and then eating food sacrificed to idols there because he says to do so is to partake in the table of demons because demons are beyond these idolatrous sacrifices.

A typical Roman trade guild festival involved worshipping the patron deities through the sacrifices and historical evidence suggests that many of these feasts devolved into sexual orgies characterized by excessive drinking and with the decrease in inhibition and self-control sexual promiscuity.

[30 : 46] The Nicolaitans were preaching the message of compromise like this. Oh no, you don't have to reject Jesus. It's okay if we participate in these sacrifices and feasts.

We can do so as Christians. Don't we all know that these idols are nothing at all? This is just Roman tradition. They're more cultural than religious.

It's what all Romans do. And don't we benefit from the patronage of Caesar, our king? What's the harm in paying him some homage and bowing before him?

We know that he's only human. Just remember that in your heart when you are participating in that worship. Please, we don't need to be so legalistic about abstaining from these.

Just be faithful to the Lord Jesus in your heart. What's the big deal about bowing down before these pagan gods whom we know are nothing but statues? Empty gesture.

[31 : 45] Don't lose sleep over it. But what about the sexual immorality? They would say, oh, don't worry about it. That's just what Romans do.

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. You know what famous orator Demosthenes once said a few centuries ago? We keep prostitutes for pleasure. We keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body.

We keep wives for the beginning of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes. You're not being unfaithful to your wife as long as you don't leave her for those other women.

It's just to satisfy our bodily desires, our fleshly desires. What we do with our bodies don't affect our souls. Sexual immorality doesn't affect your union with Christ, does it?

Hey, but if you really want to be a prude about it, forget it. You don't have to actually participate in the sexual immorality. Just watch it. Just go to the feast.

[32 : 43] Just watch it. You don't have to do it yourself. Can you hear the voices, the echoes of these seductive voices of the Nicolaitans in our day?

Are they? If you are a Christian convert from a thoroughly religious culture, whether it's Islamic, Buddhist, or Hindu, there's tremendous pressure to participate in traditional family sacrifices that are idolatrous.

I still remember from my childhood watching my parents get snubbed by their own blood brothers and sisters for refusing to bow down to ancestor worship.

They would say, hey, we're Christians too. You're not the only Christian here. you can bow down to them, serve them food, just honoring them.

Don't be mistaken. Demons are involved in every idolatrous feast. And you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons.

[34 : 00] This could happen even in our Western culture as well. I think political idolatry is not uncommon in the Western world. Are you so loyal to your favorite politician or so patriotic about your country, whether that was the Roman Empire in the Church of Pergamum days or the United States of America, that you would make spiritual and moral compromises in order to support them?

The voices of the Nicolaitans are even more obvious in terms of sexual immorality in our culture. No sex before marriage?

How quaint and old-fashioned. How will you know that you two are compatible if you don't cohabit for a while before marriage? Homosexuality?

Well, the Bible condemns homosexual abuse, but when it's consensual and monogamous homosexual relationship, it's totally sanctioned by the Bible. I've heard Christian teachers teach that very thing with my own ears.

And part of their persuasiveness lies in the fact that they actually believe themselves to be right. They're sincere. And maybe they even think they're being compassionate.

[35 : 23] But being convinced that you are right is not the same thing as being right. Just two weeks ago, I read a Christianity Today article about a prominent pastor whose network of churches ministers to 60,000 people on a weekly basis.

And he hosted a conference that was intended, quote, for parents of LGBTQ plus children and for ministry leaders looking to discover ways to support parents and LGBTQ plus children in their churches.

That sounds pretty harmless on the surface, but the problem was the conference featured speakers who are either currently in same-sex relationship or are supportive of those who are.

This is all the more confusing because this pastor insists that he still holds the traditional biblical teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman and that any other sexual union is sinful.

But then he goes on to say, well, that chastity for someone who has same-sex attraction is, quote, not sustainable. And that same-sex marriage is the next best option.

[36 : 33] This is exactly like the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We have brothers and sisters in our church who struggle with same-sex attraction, attraction. But because they know that such relationships do not fulfill God's good design for them, they have either managed to be in a heterosexual or wholesome intergendered marriages, or they have taken a vow of celibacy.

Sam Albury is a Christian author who has taken such a vow of celibacy because he struggles with same-sex attraction. And this is what he had to say about that conference. He says, quote, I have always been single.

On the whole, it has been deeply joyous. But I am not immune from temptation. And when any leader suggests to me that chaste obedience to Christ in singleness is not sustainable, he is saying the very same thing to me that the devil says.

If you have discerning ears, you can hear the voices of the Nicolaitans everywhere.

Well, fine, if you don't really want to participate in any of this, more strength to you, but it's surely fine to just observe sexual immorality, right? Porn? What harm does that do?

[37 : 52] It doesn't hurt anybody. It doesn't hurt anybody. R-rated movies with explicit scenes, it's art. It's just entertainment.

Brothers and sisters, don't be deluded. Our culture worships sex. Our culture worships sex. Everywhere it teaches us without sex like that, without sex like this, you will never have a fulfilling life, and that's a lie.

And we uncritically imbibe that message all day long. When we tolerate the teachings of the Nicolaitans, we make subtle compromises that threaten to turn our hearts away from God.

And this is important. The church in Pergamum handled overt opposition really well. They died for the faith. They did not handle subtle seduction very well.

We need to be vigilant against both. So Jesus commands them in verse 16, therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

[39 : 11] Notice the change in personal pronouns there in verse 16. I will come to you, you all, all the people in church in Pergamum, and he will war against them, not the whole church, but the Nicolaitans and those who follow their teaching.

But the whole church needs to repent of tolerating the false teachings of the Nicolaitans among their midst. Notice that Jesus' critique of the church in Pergamum doesn't say that they are actually participating in these idolatrous feasts yet, and actually participating in sexual immorality yet, as we'll see in the next passage, the church in Thyatira is actually doing those things actively.

Right now, the church in Pergamum is merely holding fast to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. They're tolerating false teachers in their midst who say that these things are okay. They're one step further removed, but they're still very close.

But Jesus doesn't merely threaten punishment for their sins.

He also promises two wonderful gifts for those who conquer. In verse 17, The manna recalls Israel's journey through the wilderness, so it fits with that allusion to the story of Balak and Balaam.

[40 : 47] And during the wilderness journey, God fed them with bread from heaven by raining manna to provide for them. The Israelites should have satisfied themselves with God's bread from heaven with manna, but instead, the Israelites whored after the Moabite woman and engaged in sexual immorality and ate at their pagan idolatrous feasts.

They ate food, sacrificed to idols. But Jesus promises here, if you hold fast and if you maintain yourself a distinct identity as Christians and you do not compromise and you endure to the end, you will eat the hidden manna.

It's hidden because it's not fully revealed yet, which will be at the wedding feast of the lamb that we'll get to partake in. There's a feast awaiting you, so don't settle for these inferior counterfeit feasts of idolatry.

That's the first gift. The second gift is a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it. There are several possible historical and biblical associations that help us make the sense of what this white stone is, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, these options.

The first is that the jurors in Rome, when they were making a judgment, indicated using a white stone or a black stone. They would hold up the black stone if they wanted to say that this person is guilty.

[42 : 18] They would hold up the white stone if they wanted to say this person is innocent. And so Jesus is assuring them, even when your society holds up the black stone and condemns you to death for your faith in Jesus, I will give you the white stone.

Say that you are righteous, you are justified, and that you belong in paradise with me. A second possible association is that stones of various colors were used for admission to public celebrations like the feasts that we have just been talking about.

Sometimes you'd have to have the stone. It's basically like your ticket, your invitation to the feast, and you'd have to show it in order to enter. And Jesus is saying, you might be excluded, you might not go to these pagan feasts, but you will have the white stone to enter into the eternal feast of the Lamb of God.

So don't be disheartened. A third possible connection is Exodus 28-21, where Israel's high priest on the ephod, on the shoulder of the ephod, and on his breastpiece, wears precious stones with the names of the tribes of Israel written on them.

The priests representing the people of God before the presence of God on his heart, bearing them on his shoulders.

[43 : 58] I think if that's the association, then I think it's fulfilled here in Jesus in a greater way, because I don't think the new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it, I don't think that's our name primarily.

Jesus promises in Revelation 3-12, the one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God.

In the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. It also says in Revelation 14-1 that the 144,000, which is a symbolic number representing all of God's chosen people, it says that they had Jesus' name and the Father's name written on their foreheads.

In Revelation 19-11-16, we're told that Jesus has a name written that no one knows but himself. But then in the following verses, it tells us exactly what the name is.

The name by which he is called is the word of God. A name written is king of kings and lord of lords. So I don't think it's our name primarily, I think it's Jesus' name.

[45 : 11] So then why is it, how is it that no one knows but him? Because it's this already but not yet paradox that we see all throughout the New Testament.

We already have God's name. We already have the name of Jesus on us, but it's not yet fulfilled in its fullness. We'll know him like we have never known him before when Christ returns.

And we'll know the preciousness of his name like we have never known before when we receive the white stone with the name on it that no one knows but himself. And how intimate is that?

That's a fellowship. So when someone knows you by name, you know them intimately. Right? Someone knows you by name. They know you personally. When Jesus says, I give you a stone with a new name on it that no one knows but me.

I impart to you something I give to no one else. I reveal myself to you in a way I haven't to anyone else. Personally, you belong to me. Jesus and his church.

[46 : 15] That's the intimate promise. My name. Because our name wouldn't do, would it?

Our names are riddled with pride, with guilt, with shame. Haven't we all in various ways compromised with the sinful world? Haven't we sinned against our God?

Haven't we participated in idolatrous feasts and feasted at our eyes on sin and immorality? Haven't we committed sexual immorality? What good a white stone with our name on it do to give us entry into the wedding feast of the Lamb?

But Jesus died for our sins on the cross. Jesus. There's no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be.

That name. That precious name of Jesus. Yes. And when you confessed your sins and you believed in Jesus and you were baptized, signifying the cleansing of all your sins, washing away all your guilt and shame, what name were you given?

[47 : 26] You were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That's your name. I am a Christian. Christian. No, that stone will not say, Sean, Christian, Christ, King of kings, Lord of lords, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That precious, ineffable, eternal name will be on that stone that we will receive if we endure. So let's hold on.

Let's pray. Yes, Father.

Father, my name is one that's full of shame and guilt. But, Lord, your name is holy. Your name is pure.

Your name is righteous. Thank you for putting your name on us. Help us to persevere with vigilance so that we do not tolerate false teaching in our midst, but instead maintain our distinct set-apart identity as Christians, help us to stand in awe of you and live with holy fear, reverence for the one who has the two-sharp, two-edged sword in his mouth.

[49 : 16] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.