

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. In a few minutes we're going to open the Bible and turn our attention to the Book of Revelation, but first I'd like to share a little bit about my recent trip to Northern Iraq.

Many of you were praying for me while I was away, and no doubt many of you prayed that God would keep me safe and allow me to return home without incident. In fact, the number one question I've been asked since returning from Iraq has been the following: *did you feel you safe?*

The short answer is "yes," but the long answer is a little more complicated. The moment you fly into Kurdistan, you can't help but notice the presence of armed military personnel. They could be found at the airport, at various street corners, and in helicopters that kept watch over the city. When we drove between cities, there were frequent checkpoints along the highway—manned by the military—but each time we explained who we were (Christians) and what we were doing (helping in the IDP Camps) we were quickly waved through.

Many of you know that I love to run, and most mornings I woke up early, laced up my shoes, and ran through the streets of Erbil and Duhok. When I ran by army personnel, I waved and smiled and they waved and smiled in return. *Was it safe?* I felt quite safe. I was confident that I wasn't going to run into any ISIS members at 6:30 am in 35 degree celsius weather.

But being in Kurdistan made me realize that the word "safe" or "safety" is a relative term—*safe compared to what? Safe compared*

to where?

During the 6 days I was in Kurdistan, less than 80 km away, in the city of Mosul, ISIS killed more than 70 people. 80 km from North Vancouver puts us roughly in Abbotsford. If we heard that 70 people had been killed in Abbotsford by an unsanctioned, heavily armed, military group, how safe would people of the North Shore feel? I suspect that there would be widespread panic. The irony is that there was no sense of panic where I was—people woke up, went to work or school, shopped at the market, and attended the local soccer match.

Safety, just like peace, is a tenuous thing in Iraq. We met with the pastor of an Alliance church and he shared some of his daily challenges: the active opposition and threat from Moslem neighbours, the open hostility he and his daughters some times experience as Christians. Where they live, one isn't thrown in jail or killed for being a Christian, but, it is certainly not easy, nor would it be categorized as "safe" from a North American perspective.

During our time in Kurdistan, we spent a few days in IDP Camps meeting with people who have been displaced because of ISIS attacks. The Yazidis are a people group that hail from the mountain region of Sinjar; they are an oppressed people group that have faced genocide more than 70 times in their history.

When ISIS went on the offensive in 2014, thousands of Yazidi people were slaughtered, and more than 500,000 Yazidis were displaced from their ancestral homes. It is estimated that there are between 200,000-300,000 Yazidis living in these Internally Displaced Peoples camps.

The Christian and Missionary Alliance is in Northern Iraq because we are committed to reaching out to people who have no access to Jesus. The Alliance has been helping to provide food, shelter, clothing, and medical clinics for the Yazidis and the plan is to continue this support, and, to begin a church among them. Within the year, we will have 4 Alliance international workers who will be relocating to Northern Iraq in order to pioneer this new work among the Yazidis.

As North Americans, we prize safety, predictability, and control; we want to be assured that no harm will befall us. It's not wrong to desire safety or peace, but if this desire determines what we believe and how we will live, we have opened the door to an idol that can—and will—draw us away from allegiance to Jesus.

Here's a question that I want you to consider this morning:

- Why would Jesus plant churches where there is strong, hostile, and sometimes deadly, opposition?

In the Book of Revelation, Jesus speaks seven messages to seven different churches; this week we turn our attention to the words Jesus spoke to the church in Pergamum. As we explore His words, we discover that this is a message to a church that was behind enemy lines. It wasn't safe following Jesus in Pergamum, in fact, one church member had recently paid the ultimate price for his faith. Let's listen to Jesus' words and may God give us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying.

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 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, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. 15 Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.”

Each of the seven messages follows a similar pattern; we've outlined this pattern in the previous two weeks, and once again I will use it to give shape to my message this morning.

1. After the opening ascription, **Jesus describes Himself using words taken** from John's prior vision. In Revelation 1:16. John says, “In his right hand he held the seven stars, *and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword.*” Here in Revelation 2:12 we read, “*These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.*” It's the same image with a minor modification, but the question is, what does it mean?

John uses this image to say something important about Jesus. This metaphor had massive implications for how Christians in Pergamum,

and for Christian around the world today, are to think about life, death, and the way we relate to governing authorities.

One of the symbols of ancient Pergamum was the gladius—a double-edged sword carried by Rome’s soldiers. It symbolized the authority Pergamum had been given, by Rome, to use capital punishment to make citizens bend to Rome’s will. Pergamum was a place where following Jesus was seen as a threat to Rome’s power; to proclaim that “**Jesus is Lord**” was to say that Caesar is not.

Fear is a useful tool in the hands of an Empire. The greatest weapon the State holds over its citizens is the threat of death—*if you do not comply, we will demand your life*. The fact that Antipas had already been executed spoke to Pergamum’s willingness to use the sword to secure compliance. But Revelation reminds us that **Jesus holds the sword!** He has ultimate power over life and death.

And so, if the State demands our life, we can stand and say—*do your worst, take my life—it will not be the end for me*. North Shore Alliance, even if our life is taken from us, we still win! This kind of logic only makes sense in light of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We belong to the One who tasted death for all, and, who was raised to life. In dying, Jesus broke the power of death, in rising from the grave, Jesus bestows life on all who believe in Him. Jesus once said, “*I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die*”.¹

¹ John 11:25.

² Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation*, 78.

The Book of Revelation offers us a God’s-Eye-View; Jesus holds the sword, and our lives are in His hands. Do you believe this? Have you put your faith in Him?

2. After His self-description, **Jesus commends the church in Pergamum for their faithfulness in the midst of persecution** and suffering. In five of the seven messages, Jesus commends the church saying, “*I know your deeds*,” but to Pergamum, He says something different.

vs. 13, “**I know where you live—where Satan has his throne;**” and once again at the end of vs. 13, Jesus refers to Pergamum as the place “**where Satan lives.**” These are strong words; why does Jesus use them?

The word Pergamum means “citadel;” the city was situated on a hill that is 1000 feet high and surrounded by a valley.² But behind Pergamum stood another hill that rose even higher; it was on this hill that temples were built to Zeus, Asklepios, and Caesar. The people of Pergamum literally dwelt in the shadow of pagan gods.

- Zeus was considered the greatest of the Greek gods; he was referred to as *Zeus, the Saviour*.
- Asklepios was a religion that focussed on healing and the main image of this religion was that of a serpent.
- But it’s very likely that the reference to Satan’s throne is directed to the cult of the Emperor.

Caesar Augustus was the first Roman Emperor to have a temple built in his honour—he was worshipped as a god, alongside the other gods. Domitian was Caesar during the time John wrote *Revelation* and he was the first Emperor to insist upon being referred to as *Lord and God*.³ John exposes these claims as satanic in nature; by demanding worship, Caesar mocked the rightful claim of the One True God.

Pergamum had so aligned itself to Rome that when Antipas refused to claim Caesar as *Lord and God*, he was put to the sword. The church in Pergamum was behind enemy lines, deep within Satan's territory. But despite heavy persecution, Jesus commended the church for "*remaining true to My Name.*"

In Revelation 1:5, John describes Jesus as the "*faithful witness;*" Jesus is the One who sees God, and, the unfolding of human history. He is the only One who can speak authoritatively about what is real and true. In Revelation 2:13, Jesus applies to Antipas the same language that was used to describe Himself—Antipas is "*my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city*".

We know from history that the death of Antipas was not an isolated incident; he was the first of many Christians who died because of allegiance to Christ. The Greek word that John uses here—*martus*—was commonly used as a general word for "witness." But in time, as many other Christians were put to the sword, the word *martus*—or

martyr—came to be applied exclusively to Christians who's witness to Christ led to their death.⁴

3. After commending the church for their faithfulness in the midst of outside pressure, **Jesus then warns the church about as threat from the inside.**

Vs. 14-16, "*Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam...[and] the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*"

In order to understand what's going here, we need to go back to the Old Testament, to the Book of Numbers, to hear the story of Balaam and his corrupting influence on the Israelites.⁵ When God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, He led them on a journey to the land of Canaan. When they entered the territory of Moab, Balak, the King of the Moabites, feared that Israel would overwhelm his nation, and so he hired Balaam to call down the curse of the gods upon them. But when Balaam opened his mouth to speak a curse, Yahweh, the God of heaven and earth, commanded him to speak a blessing—which he did.

As you can imagine, King Balak was furious, but Balaam gave the King an alternative strategy. *The Israelites are not like us; they do not worship many gods as we do; their God commands their*

³ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters To The Seven Churches Of Asia in Their Local Setting*, 86-87.

⁴ Gordon Fee, *Revelation*, 34 (footnote #11).

⁵ Numbers 22-25, 31:8, 16.

complete devotion. If you want to see Israel destroyed, entice them to join us in worshipping our gods; their God is a jealous God and He will punish them for us.

And that's exactly what happened. Some of the Israeli men became sexually involved with Moabite women, who in turn invited them to join in sacrifices to their gods. Numbers 25:2-3 says, "*The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to...Baal...And the Lord's anger burned against [Israel].*" In Jewish history, Balaam's name became a label that was attached to teachers who taught the way of compromise with the surrounding culture.

The church in Pergamum were weathering a storm from the outside; pressure was increasing to publicly declare Caesar as Lord and God; the church had refused, Antipas had refused, and his life was taken as a result. But here was another threat, much more subtle, from inside the church—some saw the mounting outside pressure and were suggesting the way of compromise: *if we cooperate with Rome—just a little—maybe they won't take our lives.*

In the first century, temple worship posed a major social and spiritual problem for Christians. The city would gather on specific days, sacrifice an animal, and then roast a portion of the meat for a feast in honour of the god. This city-wide event would draw family, friends, and neighbours together—those who were absent were *noticeably* absent, and labelled as enemies of the city. *What was the Christian to do?*

Scholars can't be sure, but most suggest that a segment of the church was encouraging others to attend these feasts and engage in the festivities. *After all, we know that these idols aren't real—they're made of wood and stone. There's only One God—we all know that—so what's the harm in going to the feast and eating the food offered to these non-gods. Why can't we try to blend in a little? If we show a little bit of harmless, civic, loyalty, they'll realize we're good people...it might even open a door to talk about Jesus!*

The idol itself was made by human hands, and as such were nothing but wood and stone; the problem is that such worship connects people to evil spirits that have set themselves against God and humanity.⁶ Those who advocated blending in thought they were making a harmless compromise with Rome; *Revelation* warns that something more dangerous was taking place—they were abandoning allegiance to Jesus and collaborating with Satan himself.

Here in North America, we no longer live in the world of temples, idols, and sacred feasts, but make no mistake, we are surrounded by an unseen spiritual reality. Satan is still God's enemy and he continues to wage war upon humanity in general, and the Church in particular. **How does he wage war upon the Church?** All too often his voice is silky smooth, indeed, it appears to be the voice of reason, suggesting small compromises with culture, here and there—all in the name of getting along or remaining relevant. But these compromises, like small steps all along the way, lead us far from Jesus.

⁶ Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship On The Edge*, 82.

We need to ask ourselves, *what is having the greater influence on what we think and desire, is it Jesus (and His Word), or is it Canadian culture?* Is our thinking on sexuality and gender being driven by the Bible, or, by the culture? Are we bowing down to Jesus on Sundays, and then bowing down to materialism on Monday through Saturday? What do we prize more, obedience to Jesus, or protecting our personal safety and comfort? Is North Shore Alliance influencing the city, or is the city influencing our church?

Every church, in every place, in every chapter of history, must beware of capitulating to culture. What might seem a harmless compromise might be a dangerous step towards the destruction of our witness to Christ.

We need to remain true to God, and, move towards the world that God loves. Jesus came to save—He was labelled a “*friend of sinners*,” a label He proudly wore. This is where we regularly find Jesus—standing between God and culture, with an arm reaching in both directions. And the Church has always been at her best, when it stands with Jesus and does the same.

And so Jesus warns the church in Pergamum, *Repent...or I will come to you and fight against you with the sword of my mouth.* Jesus Himself will do battle with those who would destroy the church from the inside out.

4. The message to Pergamum concludes with **a word of promise:**

⁷ John 6:33-35.

⁸ Fee, 36.

“To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.”

The mention of manna hearkens back to God feeding Israel, with a miraculous provision of bread, as they journeyed through the desert. In John’s Gospel, Jesus referred to this event saying, “**I** am the bread of life. *Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*”⁷

As for the white stone, scholars have suggested a few possibilities but let me share with you the meaning that seems most likely to me. In court cases being decided by a jury, a verdict against the defendant was indicated by way a black stone, while a verdict of “*not guilty*” was indicated by way of a white stone. Additionally, there is evidence that white stones were used as tokens to gain admission to public festivals.⁸

Taken together with the reference to manna, I believe Jesus is saying the following:

You have been persecuted because your faith in Me; Antipas was found “guilty” of crimes against the Empire and was executed because of My Name. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne—and yet you have been faithful. To the one who perseveres in their faith, I will give a white stone. I pronounce you “not guilty” and invite you to join me in the

great, heavenly, feast I am preparing for you and all of God's people. The one who remains true to me will conquer death, and you will never hunger or thirst again.

As I conclude, I want to return the question I asked in the beginning: *Why would Jesus plant a church behind enemy lines, where it's not safe, where some might lose their lives? **Because He loves**...* He loves those who have set themselves up as His enemy; He loves those who are walking in darkness; He loves those are seeking for truth, but are looking in all the wrong places; He loves those who are lost and don't know it.

The Father loved the world so much that He sent His Son. And Jesus—the Son—loves the world so much that He sends us...to our neighbourhoods, to our shops and offices, to our high schools and universities, to Cuba, and to Kurdistan. Will you go?

Communion: This morning as we come to the Lord's Table, we do so remembering the cost of our salvation—Jesus died on the cross for our sin. This holy meal serves to remind us of the great, heavenly, feast that Jesus is preparing for us when He returns. While we wait for that day, He promises to sustain us with Himself.

As you come to the table this morning, I want to encourage you to come with repentance in your heart. Where have we compromised with culture and watered down our allegiance to Jesus? The word “repent” means to stop, turn around, and go in the opposite direction. Where is the Lord asking us to return to Him? As you come to His table, lay before Him whatever He asks for.

Come knowing that He loves you and receives you as His beloved daughter or son.

“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”⁹

At this time I want to invite those serving the Lord's Supper to come and take their place—we have three stations on the main floor and one/two stations in the balcony. When the band begins to play, when you are ready, you can come forward to receive. As you tear a piece of bread from the loaf, the one serving you will say, *“The Body of Christ was broken for you.”* Then, as you dip the bread in the cup, another server will say, *“The blood of Christ was shed for you.”* At that time you can eat with thanksgiving.

I also want to let you know that our prayer ministry team is ready and willing to pray for whatever need you might have—prayer for physical healing, for the reconciling of a relationship, or anything else. While people are receiving the bread and cup, one prayer ministry team is going to be on the main floor, to my left, at the back, near the exit; another will be to my right, at the back; we also have a team in the balcony, to my, right, beside the door to the Upper Room.

Worship: *Lead Us Back*

⁹ 1 Corinthians 11:24-26.

Prayer Ministry Announcement: In just a moment I will speak a final word of blessing before our service concludes, but I wanted to share a brief story with you about an answered prayer.

A few weeks ago, someone came forward for prayer for the first time—they couldn't find housing and they thought their family was going to have to move off the North Shore. Shortly after being prayed for, God provided housing in Lynn Valley. God knows what we need and He delights to answer when we ask.

If you have a need and would like prayer this morning, we would love to join you in asking the Father to help.

I also want to remind you that Gaileen Warden is going to be in the Upper Room following the service; if you'd like to hear more about her ministry, if you have questions you'd love to ask, she would be happy to meet and talk with you.

Benediction