

Pergamum and the Sharp Sword

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, October 1, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 2:12-17; Revelation 1:14-16; Isaiah 49:2; Isaiah 11:1-4; Judges 3:16-22; Proverbs 5:3-4; Psalm 149:5-6; Revelation 19:11-16; Isaiah 63:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:8
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:11:58 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

To a church living in the shadow of Satan's throne, Jesus does not introduce himself as the gentle shepherd. He introduces himself as the one with the sharp two-edged sword — and the sword comes out of his mouth. He speaks, and it is over. Our assignment is not to defeat the darkness; it is to stay faithful to the only one who can.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Every letter in Revelation opens with Jesus describing himself, and the description always fits the trouble that church is in. Pergamum got the warrior.
- ◆ “I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is” and “you hold fast my name” arrive in the same breath. Jesus knows the address and commends the faithfulness anyway.
- ◆ A two-edged sword in the Hebrew is literally a sword *of mouths*, and in Greek a double-mouthed sword. Wherever it appears in Scripture, it has to do with speech that cuts.
- ◆ Part of a mature faith is making room for a God who fights back. Insulate yourself from how bad evil actually gets and wrath starts to look unnecessary.
- ◆ Isaiah's branch judges the poor with righteousness and kills the wicked with the breath of his lips. The same person does both.
- ◆ In Isaiah 63 and again in Revelation 19, the hero's robe is bloodstained and nobody else's is. He treads the winepress alone.

- ◆ There is no situation so far gone that a word from him cannot turn it. The one who spoke worlds into being can speak again.

► 1:11:58

Hope Chapel is partway through a series in Revelation, and this week the mail goes to Pergamum — what Matt called “sort of like the battle scene letter out of the seven.” Jesus opens each letter with a description of himself relevant to what he is about to say. Pergamum gets this one: “the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.” Matt’s reaction was unguarded. “Right off the bat I’m like, yes, let’s do this.”

Why a battle story is the right story

► 1:14:07

He taught high school math because he had the degree, not because he loved graphs. What he loves is a story — and the one he reached for was the kung fu movie, which he can narrate from memory because they all run the same way. First the cruelty, aimed at people who cannot defend themselves, until you are genuinely angry. Then a protagonist who is not merely good at fighting but has *given it up* — Bruce Lee stepping off a boat in a new city, wearing the necklace his mother gave him to remind him of the promise never to fight again. He tries diplomacy. The cruel men go after his friends. They strike him, the necklace breaks, and he looks up in a rage. “And you’re like: yes, finally, do it. It’s what you long for.”

► 1:16:34

Then the turn that made the illustration worth telling: “It’s important that part of our faith has the maturity to incorporate when it’s appropriate for God especially to fight back.” We insulate ourselves from how bad evil can get, Matt said, and conclude there is no room for wrath and no need for it — let’s have a powwow. Pergamum had no such insulation, which is exactly why this was the self-description they needed.

The sword did not come out of nowhere

► 1:17:45

Matt made a case for a way of reading before he made a case about the sword. Study can get so granular — this verse, this word, how this word was inflected — that the shape disappears. He is not against the granular work and does plenty of it. But the corrective is to read the Bible the way you read

Lord of the Rings: get a cup of coffee, sit down comfortably, and read for the story. Do that, and the double-edged sword turns out to be a thread running back as far as Judges.

► 1:18:51

“The hairs of his head were white like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.”

REVELATION 1:14–16 ↗

There it is the first time. It returns in the letter to Pergamum, and again in [Revelation 19](#), where the rider on the white horse leads an army with a sword coming out of his mouth. Matt also pointed out that Revelation itself tells you what a good handful of its images mean — and twice, dropped into the middle of the visions, comes the line “[here is a call for the endurance of the saints](#).” That is the book’s own statement of purpose. Knowing who has the final word is what makes endurance possible.

“I know where you dwell”

► 1:20:29

“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.”

REVELATION 2:13 ↗

“How would you like to hear that?” Matt asked. “I know where you live, in the armpit of hell.” And then the second half of the sentence, which is an honor: *yet you hold fast my name*. To Smyrna, Jesus had only hinted they might need to be faithful [to the point of death](#). Pergamum had already buried Antipas. The stench of death and decay was suffocating, and Jesus set his own throne against the one down the street — his surrounded by thousands of thousands of angels and the faithful, with Christ the warrior king at the center.

► 1:22:39

Then the complaint. Some among them hold [the teaching of Balaam](#), who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before Israel — a story already ancient to a church that is ancient to us — and some hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans, who appear to be abusing freedom in Christ and the forgiveness

he offers as cover for self-indulgence. Jesus says he hates it, and commends the Ephesians for hating it too. For those of us whose softness is usually the right instinct, Matt said, a Jesus who hates certain things is worth wrestling with rather than editing out. The remedy is stated plainly: repent, or “I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”

Isaiah’s servant, and the branch

► 1:26:05

Isaiah is where the imagery lives, and Isaiah is a fitting place to go: his was a ministry among people so hard-hearted that the more he preached, the harder they got. It is where *ears to hear* comes from. In [Isaiah 49:2](#), the servant says, “He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me.” The same figure later turns out to be the one who suffers.

► 1:27:48

He appears again under a different name. God tells Israel’s faithless leadership that the tree is coming down, the stump will be scorched, and out of that shriveled thing will come a shoot.

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him... He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”

ISAIAH 11:1–4 ↗

► 1:29:44

Matt slowed down here to teach the poetry. Hebrew verse does not rhyme; it pairs. Not judging by what his eyes see, not deciding by what his ears hear — one idea, twice. Righteousness for the poor, equity for the meek — one idea, twice. Which settles the last pair: striking the earth with the rod of his mouth is the same act as killing the wicked with the breath of his lips. “What is he going to just hit the ground for? Is he drumming? Are we talking about slapping dirt, or is there something specific in mind — in particular, maybe his enemies?”

A sword of mouths

► 1:35:14

Swords are everywhere in the Bible; *two-edged* swords are rare, and every time one shows up there is a double meaning attached. Ehud sharpens a short blade on both sides, hides it, tells the king *I have a word from God for you* — and the Hebrew for “word” can also mean an object. The room clears. He delivers both. In Proverbs 5:3–4, the immoral woman’s lips drip honey and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is “sharp as a two-edged sword” — the sword is her mouth. And near the close of the Psalms, praise and a blade sit in the same couplet:

“Let the godly exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands.”

PSALM 149:5–6 ↗

The Hebrew phrase for a two-edged sword is *a sword of mouths*, because it eats and devours; the Greek does the same thing, a double-mouthed sword. So a sword coming out of the mouth of Christ is not a surprise. It is the language finally arriving where it was always headed.

He treads the winepress alone

► 1:39:28

Back to the white horse. The rider is called Faithful and True, “and in righteousness he judges and makes war” — the two things the branch was said to do. His robe is dipped in blood and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven follow in fine linen, white and pure.

“From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”

REVELATION 19:15–16 ↗

Matt asked the room to look at what the riders are not doing. Their robes are not bloodstained. It is not clear they are carrying weapons, and less clear they used them. All the fighting belongs to the King — which is exactly the picture Isaiah drew centuries earlier of a figure coming up from Edom already crimson, splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength.

► 1:41:35

“I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me... I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold; so my own arm brought me salvation, and my wrath upheld me.”

ISAIAH 63:3–5 ↗

And a prayer from Judges, prayed generations before any of this, gets its answer in that vision: “So may all your enemies perish, O LORD! But your friends be like the sun as he rises in his might.” The King destroys his enemies; his friends shine.

Which means it is never too late

► 1:43:31

Paul says the same thing without any imagery at all. The enemies of Christ “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1:9) — except that “away” is not in the Greek. It reads *from the face of the Lord*, and the only other place that phrase turns up is Peter promising that “times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” Refreshing comes from his face; so does the undoing of his enemies. A chapter later Paul drops the veil entirely: the lawless one “whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth.”

► 1:45:14

Here the kung fu movie finally breaks down, and that was the point. In those films there is always the moment where the hero is bleeding, outnumbered, probably has a broken arm, and you are not sure he can finish — you love it because you are not sure. In this story there was never a moment when it almost did not work. “The very one who spoke worlds into being — all he has to do is speak, and uncreate or recreate however he wants.” He is not sitting at the back managing reinforcements. He is in front, doing all of it.

► 1:46:43

So to a church already losing people, and to anyone carrying something that looks finished: “There’s no such thing as a hopeless situation with him. Never. One word from the Lord of glory and everything can change.” Which relieves us of a job we were never given. We fight evil and we resist the devil, but bringing down principalities and powers was never the assignment.

► 1:49:00

Matt closed by naming the temptation on the other side — the Christ complex, he called it, and noted that the role has already been filled. “You’ve not been cast in that role.” Our purity, our resistance, our service are crowns laid at his feet, not the machinery by which the world gets saved. He is the one who

said *it is finished*, after his own heavy lifting and not ours. And still: give of yourself, even to the point of death if it comes to that, because he is worth it and his victory was never in question.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Revelation 2:12
- Revelation 1:14–16
- Revelation 19:11–16
- Revelation 14:12
- Revelation 2:13
- Revelation 2:10
- Revelation 2:14–16
- Isaiah 49:2
- Isaiah 11:1–4
- Judges 3:16–22
- Proverbs 5:3–4
- Psalm 149:5–6
- Revelation 19:15–16
- Isaiah 63:3–5
- Judges 5:31
- 2 Thessalonians 1:9
- Acts 3:19–20
- 2 Thessalonians 2:8

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Jesus chose a different self-description for each church. Why do you think Pergamum needed the one with the sword, and which description would you have expected him to lead with?
2. Matt said we can insulate ourselves from how bad evil gets until wrath seems unnecessary. Where have you done that, and what did it cost you?
3. “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is” and “you hold fast my name” come in the same sentence. What does it do to you that Jesus says both at once?
4. The riders behind the King have clean robes. What have you been trying to do that was only ever his to do?
5. Name the situation you have quietly written off as hopeless. If one word from him can turn it, what does faithfulness look like in it this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEPFzEn8-M&t=4318s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.