

"The Seven Martyrs of the Apocalypse: Dear Pergamum"

Revelation 2: 12-17

Introduction

I've got two acronyms for you today. YOLO. FOMO. Young people: YOLO of course means, all together: _____. Now, maybe this second one, FOMO, is more of an acronym for us middle-aged folks. As we'll see, though, I think these two things go together.

One journalist says that even though it impacts people of all ages, "FOMO feels sort of high-schoolish." And with today's technology keeping us connected, "even the most popular kid in class can now feel left out" (Hephzibah Anderson). FOMO is a legitimate problem. There's lots of research. And it's not new; it's as old as Adam and Eve, and it was alive and well in first-century Pergamum.

We continue our study today of the seven letters from Jesus through John to seven churches in what's now Turkey: Churches who were called to be faithful witnesses or (in Greek) "martyrs" to Jesus.

We'll look first at how in some ways the church in Pergamum (and our church today) has **resisted** FOMO. Then we'll see how at the very same time, they were, and we are, **enslaved** to FOMO, as if they/we actually believed YOLO. Finally, we'll look at the only way that FOMO can truly be **conquered**.

1. FOMO-resistance
2. FOMO-captivity
3. FOMO-conquering

1. FOMO-resistance.

Today, if someone wrote you a note and said "I have a weapon, and I know where you live," you'd call the police! So it's a little awkward when Jesus Christ writes a letter to a church and says, "I have a really sharp sword (12) and I know where you live"(13)!

But he's saying, of course, that he understands the pressure that they are under. He knows what Pergamum is like. He knows how hard it is to stay true in that kind of place. He is deeply grateful for their tough, gutsy loyalty.

Then the letter feels awkward again: Jesus says that Satan has his throne in their city (13). This sounds a little like something that an American televangelist might say. What does Jesus mean?

Not every local ruler in the Roman Empire had the "right of the sword." But the governor of Pergamum had this right. He held the keys of death and life.

When Revelation was written, *official* persecution of Christians across the Empire was not yet happening. But in many cities, the pressure against Jesus-followers was growing.

Pergamum worshipped a god of healing with a snake as its symbol. There was also a great altar to Zeus. There were shrines and festivals to many other gods. And as the capital of its province, Pergamum was also its center of emperor-worship.

So Jesus says: "Dear church, I know that there are plenty of people to make false accusations against you. They say you're bad neighbors when you don't worship their many gods. I know your temptation to show allegiance to idols and emperors. I know that following me in Pergamum is not safe."

Zurich today is different. But if you're following Jesus, and trying to be a faithful witness, it's tough. Culture says you must perform, succeed; you must accumulate wealth and increase your influence. There's the temptation to live for work. To live for pleasure, vacation, romance. To cut cheat. To hide your weaknesses.

Following Jesus makes you different than the culture around you. You are committed to serving Jesus and your neighbor, not yourself, with your work. You don't live for pleasures, vacations, or romance, but for God's kingdom. As you make Jesus your all-in-all, all your decisions become *Christian* decisions. Being faithful can make you look and sound ... and *feel* pretty weird.

We don't know that much about this Antipas in verse 13, except that his nickname meant "against everything." That's the kind of lie people said about Christians in the Roman world: "we can't trust them; they're against everything!" Because Antipas bore

witness to the fact that ultimately “everything” was found in Jesus, and not in the pleasures and gods of Pergamum, they put him to death!

I don't know everything about your daily life. Except that if you're following Jesus, then many people are going to wrongly assume that you are “against everything.” They probably won't kill you, but they may often treat you like you are dead.

Hear what Jesus through the Spirit says to the churches of the first and twenty-first centuries: I know what it takes for you to stay true to me. All that you've done, and that you're doing: I know. I am honored by it. You are resisting the FOMO.

2. FOMO-captivity

But Jesus also has a problem with the church. He uses some symbolic references that are hard for us to understand completely --- Balaam and Balack (14), and the Nicolaitans (15). But it's clear (14) that some people in the church were encouraging others to do get involved in pagan religious feasts and sexual immorality.

Sex was often connected with religious rituals in the ancient world. Judaism and Christianity both insisted that believers must follow the Lord, and not the culture, when it comes to sex.

Here's the thing: our secular culture acts just like an ancient religion, calling us to show our secular beliefs through our sexual practices. “Be loyal secularists! Be sexually liberated!”

Like the church in Pergamum, we're tempted to go with the culture here. If we give in, like many of them did, then we're saying, just like they did: “look, we want to be Christians, but we also want to have our other temples and altars and gods, too.”

I often run along the Limmat River, past the Landesmuseum---a building full of all kinds of stories of what Zurich has been. Right across the river is a pornography shop. We have monuments to Zurich's past on one side of the river, and a temple to our culture's current FOMO on the other side of the river.

We are so plagued by the FOMO, that we dabble in compromising activities. Sexuality is one but there are dozens of other “gods” in our culture. We want to be Christians, to

be good witnesses. We say that only Jesus ultimately satisfies. But we are afraid of missing out! And so we compromise. We bow at the altar of our FOMO.

Jesus wants to make us into new creations. But we tell him that we are really just looking for something spiritual to add to our lives.

Jesus calls us to repent, believe the good news, and enter God's kingdom. But we tell him that we don't want to miss out.

Jesus wants us to testify to the world that in him we can have real life, abundant life, eternal life. But instead we bear a YOLO witness.

The more that we indulge our FOMO with YOLO sorts of compromises, the easier it becomes to do it again, and again, and again. Until we are living a double life: faithful church attendance, sure. But more and more secrets, deeper compromises.

400 years ago John Owen said that we must be killing sin, or sin will be killing us. We don't intend to deny Jesus. But before we know it, we are hooked and addicted, and we have killed our desire to kill our sin. Before we know it, we have hard hearts: hard toward truth, hard toward the needs of our neighbor, hard toward God's commandments, hard toward God.

Eventually YOLO is no longer a silly thing that teenagers jokingly say. It actually becomes the one and only belief that our messed-up hearts will trust and obey.

But Jesus shatters that falsehood today with the sharp words that come from his mouth (12, 16).

How are you and I ... how are we, enslaved to the FOMO? How have we compromised our witness? How insensitive have we become to the conviction of the Holy Spirit?

3. The FOMO-conqueror

What is it that we really want? What is it that our FOMO says about us? The stupid things we do and dumb attitudes we have are often really good signs of what we were really made for. The fake gods we serve tell us a lot, actually, about what we desire. And, if we listen closely, they tell us a lot about how Jesus actually satisfies those desires in ways nothing else can.

For Lent I've gone off social media. Because for me FOMO works like this: I don't want to miss out on a chance to connect with people a long way away from me. I "like" people's posts and comment on them in order to signal to them that even though I'm a long ways away, I'm with them. And I post and post and post because I really want people near and far me to remember that I've got something unique and valuable to contribute. That I am always a newer and better and more clever and funnier and more spiritually mature and more eloquent version of myself. I don't want to miss out on a chance to have people tell me, by their likes and comments, that I matter. That they know.

For so many of us, FOMO is about a sense of self-worth. In ancient Pergamum, FOMO probably had a lot more to do with a sense of economic and spiritual security. But at the center of these fears is the same fear: the fear of death. The fear that we only live once.

Whether we search for sexual or economic fulfillment in the wrong ways, or whether we it's power or respect we are addicted to, we fear death. That's why we're trying to get as much of what we want as we can before it's too late.

But as we saw last week, Jesus breaks the lie of YOLO by his resurrection. He (12), not the governor of Pergamum, has the right of the sword, the power over life and death. He offers escape from FOMO by promising to be for us, in life eternal, all in all. That's what (17) this white stone with a new and secret name is all about. That's what the "hidden manna" is all about. Jesus will be for us an intimate friend. There's something --- something secret and intimate and everlasting --- between each true Christian believer and Jesus that is only ever between the two of them. This experience sustains us forever. We can enjoy the sort of intimacy and significance that we were designed for. With him. Always.

Jesus gives us the words of repentance and new life here: he teaches us to say: "My FOMO is wrong and untrue. It is a lie that YOLO. Everything I don't want to miss out on is ultimately found nowhere but in Jesus."

And what's the reward for true repentance and the faithfulness that follows? Jesus himself!

Isn't that amazing? Jesus says, in the same letter, both: "you've been untrue" *and* "return to me, and I will be true---intimately, satisfyingly, eternally---to you."

This is the good news. We aren't who we were meant to be. But still Jesus calls us back to himself, welcomes us in, and sticks close by us, forever.