

The Church of the Servant King

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Prophecy Series

(Proph21C_Revelation_chps2&3 – Part 4)

The Seven Churches Continued (Rev 2:1-3:22)

We have been examining chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation in a manner that is consistent with the **historical** view or interpretation of this passage. In this lesson, we continue with our examination of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3.

THYATIRA (2:18-29)

Historical Facts

Some recap – A major historical fact to remember that affected the history of all of the cities mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3 is the role that the successor rulers to Alexander the Great played in the history of the region in which all of these cities were (and are) located. You may recall that Alexander the Great lived for only 33 years (356-323 B.C.) and conquered most of the known world from Greece and Macedonia eastward to the modern-day Pakistan/India region. His conquests extended to the south as well and encompassed Egypt. To accomplish this feat, he had to defeat many powerful empires and peoples including the Athenian Greeks, the Thracians (Asia Minor/Turkey), the Egyptians, the Persians and various groups in the modern-day area of Pakistan and India. After his death and a few years of jockeying for position, four major regions of his empire with four major rulers emerged just as predicted in Biblical prophecy (Daniel 2 & 7).

- Cassander – controlled Macedonia to the north of modern-day Greece
- Lysimachus – controlled Thrace (Asia Minor and modern-day Turkey)
- Seleucus – controlled Mesopotamia (the location of the former Persian and Lydian empires)
- Ptolemy – controlled the area corresponding to Egypt

Eventually, the kingdoms of these rulers began to disintegrate. One of the major powers that emerged in the region of Asia Minor (the location of the seven churches of Revelation 2 & 3) was the kings of Pergamum as we noted in our study of the church at Ephesus. You may recall that the kings of Pergamum had a favorable relationship with Rome and the last of the kings of Pergamum (Attalus III) willed his empire to Rome at his death in 133 B.C. which included a region that contained some of the very cities mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3. This was in defiance of the Seleucid empire to the east (Mesopotamia) which was beginning to contend for geography against the expanding Roman empire. (By this point in history, the empire of Lysimachus [360-281 B.C.] which embraced Asia Minor had disintegrated upon his death in battle against the Seleucids at the Battle of Corupedium in 281 B.C.).

All of this history is important to our study of these churches and cities mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3 because it is the heavy influence of Greek culture spread by Alexander the Great, which culture included the worship of so many different pagan deities, combined with the influence of the successor Roman empire with the emperor worship that had become prominent by the time of Domitian (ruled A.D. 81-96) that provides a major part of the historical context. At the end of the 1st Century A.D., Christianity was still very young and only John remained of the original Apostles.

Pagan influences – The faith of believers was being challenged by the pagan philosophies and practices of the day, thus the frequent mention of the syncretistic heresies we find in these chapters. For instance, Jesus mentions the compromising influence of the *Nicolaitans* in Ephesus (2:6) and Pergamos (2:15); the “*doctrine of Balaam*” in Pergamos (2:14) and the false prophet *Jezebel* in Thyatira (2:20). The believers in these cities were being lured

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into a distorted belief system that promoted compromise between their Christian faith and exploitation of the principle of Christian liberty so as to embrace pagan practices that included licentiousness, sexual immorality, and drunkenness that surrounded the worship of idols and pagan deities.

Opposition from unbelieving Jews or Judaizers – All of this behavior was characteristic of that which the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 50 (Acts 15) explicitly requested the Apostle Paul to discourage in the new Gentile converts. In the churches that Paul founded among the Gentiles, this behavior was frequently addressed and must have been a constant threat to the spread of the truth among the Gentiles as well as a basis of accusation from non-believers such as the Judaizers (e.g. 1 Cor 5:1-5, 9-13; 11:17-22; Gal 5:19-21; Eph 4:17-19; Phil 3:18-19; Col 3:5-11; 1 Thess 4:1-8; 2 Tim 3:1-4:5).

The Judaizers were a constant threat to the early Church Age Body of Christ as well. It is quite possible and even likely that their philosophical and even physical attacks against the growing faith continued until John's day. We see Jesus referencing Jewish unbelievers as the "synagogue of Satan" in Smyrna (2:9) and in Philadelphia (3:9).

Thyatira – Thyatira was situated to the southeast of Pergamum and about half-way to Sardis. It was a Macedonian colony and military garrison founded by Lysimachus between 300 and 282 BC in order to protect Pergamum and the Caicus Valley from Seleucid conquest.¹ About 190 BC, Rome assumed control of Thyatira and made it a part of the province of Asia.

The nature of its situation exposed it to necessary destruction by every conqueror, and required complete restoration after every siege. It was right in the way of an invasion and had to be captured before the invader could move on. It guarded a rich region and had to be defended to the last, causing the conqueror to accomplish a complete devastation. Yet because of natural conditions it could never be a very strong fortress, so successful resistance was nearly impossible. After conquest,² however, the new power had to refortify the city if he wanted to hold his ground.

By the time that John wrote, Thyatira was just becoming a prosperous city and her military origins were becoming a memory, however vivid they may have continued to be.³ The city's location along a commercial trade road which ran from Pergamum to Thyatira to Sardis and then to Philadelphia and Laodicea gave rise to a number of craftsman's guilds for which the city became famous.⁴ The industries and occupations represented by these guilds included wool, linen, outer garments, dyers, leather workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers, and bronze smiths.⁵ Therefore, if one wanted to maintain a job, he/she would need to maintain connections with one of the trade guilds.

Each trade guild had its own guardian god.⁶ At any trade guild proceeding, formal homage would be paid to the patron deity by a sacrifice in that deity's name.⁷ At the guild

¹ Thomas, Robert L., *Revelation 1 - 7, an Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1992), 206.

² Ibid., 207.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 207.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 208.

festivals, members would be expected to eat food that was offered to the idol and that was acknowledged as being on the table as a gift from the god.⁸ At the end of the feast, fornication and other sinful activities were common. In addition to the pagan worship associated with the trade guilds, Apollo was the chief deity of the city with other temples to Artemis and Tyrimnaios.⁹ Emperor worship was not a major factor in Thyatira.

New Testament Background Involving Thyatira

The New Testament contains no record of how Thyatira was evangelized; however, it does note that Paul's first convert in Philippi was from Thyatira (Acts 16:14). The purple cloth she sold was a major product of the city.¹⁰

The Relationship Between the Historical and New Testament Background and Revelation 2:18-29

18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:

19 ‘I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. 20 ‘But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit *acts of immorality* and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 ‘And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. 22 ‘Behold, I will cast her upon a bed *of sickness*, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. 23 ‘And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. 24 ‘But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you. 25 ‘Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. 26 ‘And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; 27 AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received *authority* from My Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’¹¹

The criticisms Christ had for the church at Thyatira were related to those at Pergamum, but the problems were beyond the embryonic stage. A Christian tradesman would be exposed to many temptations to compromise to idolatry at any trade guild proceeding. Evidently, many had succumbed to this temptation for they had accepted the teaching of one named “Jezebel” (Rev. 12:20). This was probably a symbolic name for a prominent woman in the church who claimed to be a prophetess, a legitimate spiritual gift in the early church. However, not all who claimed to be

⁷ Blaiklock, E. M., *The Seven Churches, an Exposition of Revelation, Chapters Two and Three* (Wheaton, Illinois: Van Kampen Press), 45.

⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 208.

⁹ *Ibid*, 408.

¹⁰ Gregg, Steve, *Revelation, Four Views, A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 70.

¹¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1977).

a prophet or a prophetess were true prophets or prophetesses. Her erroneous teaching encouraged others to participate in pagan idol worship and acts of immorality similar to the Nicolaitans. She could have been part of the same sect; however, it is probably more likely that the Nicolaitans, Balaam, and Jezebel just had similar characteristics. Their differences distinguished them as separate parties under the influence of Satanic logic that was intended to dilute the effectiveness of the message of Christ.

For such a person [the Christian convert] it was a relief to discover on the authority of the Spirit...that Christians need not separate themselves from such practices, least of all in matters related to business. They need not fear pagan immorality and sacrificial practices, because men and women in whom the Spirit dwells know that the flesh cannot defile the spirit.¹²

¹² Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 217.