

THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES AT THYATIRA AND SARDIS

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA – THE CORRUPT CHURCH

Revelation 2:18-29

Background

- The name of the city means “castle of Thya” and is known today as the Turkish city of Akhisar
 - It was located about 40 miles to the southeast of Pergamum and was originally founded as a military garrison on the main road to Pergamum
 - Thyatira was never an important political city as it was located on a trade route between Pergamum and Sardis and never reached the prominence that some of the other cities in Asia achieved
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- “A city in the Lycus River valley...Thyatira was the center of a number of trade guilds which used the natural resources of the area to make it a very profitable site. Thyatira had a Jewish contingent out of which grew a New Testament Church. One of Paul’s first converts from the European continent, Lydia, was a native of Thyatira (Acts 16:14). She probably was a member of a guild there which dealt in purple dye.”¹
 - A number of artisan guilds (i.e. labor unions) were represented (copper, bronze, dyers, bakers, wools, leather, slaves, potters, etc.) and each member had to participate in religious rites
 - Work was nearly impossible to obtain if one was not a member of a guild
 - “The guilds were closely connected with the Asiatic religion of the place. Pagan feasts, with which immoral practices were associated, were held, and therefore the nature of the guilds was such that they were opposed to Christianity.”²
 - In the city were a number of temples to pagan gods, one of them dedicated to Sambethe with a shrine for a prophetess which may have represented Jezebel mentioned in Rev 2:20



¹ Holman Bible Dictionary, 1345.

² International Bible Encyclopedia, 2977.

- Unfortunately, the church at Thyatira allowed the worldly influences around it into the church without confronting them
- As such, Christ's letter to it illustrates the serious consequences of failing to guard the purity of the church

Revelation 2:18 ~ 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:

- Again, Christ borrowed imagery from John's initial vision (Rev 1:12-16) that ties to the nature of His message to the church
- In this case, Christ's self-description foreshadowed His message to the church:
 - "The Son of God" = an affirmation of His deity and, as a result, His transcendence, holiness, judgment
 - "eyes like a flame of fire" = signifies His perfect omniscience and that nothing is hidden from his sight
 - "feet like burnished bronze" = signifies His authority and judgment over the church
- Christ's description of Himself indicates the divine wrath is about to be poured out on this idolatrous, immoral congregation
- "The Lord's letter to Thyatira marks a shift in the language and tone of His correspondence. In the first group – the letters to Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum – the churches had stayed true to the faith and had not yielded to the assaults of sin. Ephesus was characterized by loyalty to Christ and sound teaching, but was lacking love. Smyrna's loyalty to the Lord had been tested by fire, and they had faithfully persevered. Even to the compromising church of Pergamum, the Lord praises some of them for holding fast to His name. Not so for the church in Thyatira, or for those who follow in Sardis and Laodicea. In these cities, the situations were far worse. It was no longer a small minority of the believers who were sinning. These churches were dominated by the satanic influences of false teaching and immorality, and the letters to them indicate the Lord's wrath over their impurity."³

Commendation

Revelation 2:19 ~ I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.

- Some true and faithful believers in the church in Thyatira provided the basis for their commendation
- These precious few believers were known by Christ because of their "deeds...love...faith...service...perseverance"
- They were also commended for the fact that they were growing in these godly traits ("your deeds of late are greater than at first")

Condemnation

- Despite a few faithful believers and Christ's commendation of them, however, all was not well in Thyatira
- The church was largely a cesspool of immorality and, because of such corruption within the church, Christ leveled a scathing rebuke against it

Revelation 2:20 ~ 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.

- The glaring failure of the church was its willing to "tolerate" sin and spiritual wickedness

³ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, 107-108.

- Although it is fashionable and politically correct today for “Christians” and churches to be tolerant, God requires that the church be intolerant of any sin which would threaten its purity
- Scripture does not identify by name the individual whom Christ called “Jezebel,” however, He pointedly identified her wicked deeds which were polluting the church
- She was possibly a leader in the church, betraying a first-century form of feminism and a violation of the principle in 1 Timothy 2:12 ~ But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.
- Her name “Jezebel” suggests that she was corrupting the Thyatira church much like king Ahab’s wife Jezebel corrupted Israel

1 Kings 16:31-33 ~ It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him. 32 So he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria. 33 Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

- Under Ahab and Jezebel, the worship of Baal (the god of rainstorms and fertility) became an official part of Israel’s worship
- Even Elijah’s, God’s prophet, had to flee from the murderous intents of wicked Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-4)
- She died a gruesome death (her body was eaten by dogs), demonstrating God’s judgment on her wickedness (2 Kings 9:30-37)
- As a result, Jezebel’s name became synonymous with evil and the corruption of God’s people
- In a similar way, this “Jezebel” (probably not her real name) in Thyatira was leading God’s people astray with her false teaching, idolatry, and immorality
- She was a “prophetess,” claiming to speak on behalf of God
- She taught and led God’s “bond-servants astray” by urging them to continue their pagan worship of idols
- She led them to “commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols”
- Although the exact nature of her false teaching is unknown, the effect of her corruption polluted the church and lowered their spiritual defenses such that they were led into grave sin
- She convinced them that the extreme immorality associated with paganism was behavior believers should engage in
- Such a license to openly indulge in the sins of the flesh brought Christ’s stern judgment

Revelation 2:21 ~ I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality.

- Despite being confronted with her blasphemous teaching, she was unwilling to turn from it
- As a result, God’s patience with her had come to an end and Christ promised sudden and immediate judgment

Revelation 2:22-23 ~ Behold, I will throw her on 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.

- Because of her acts of apostasy, Christ promised to reign down divine judgment on her and all who associated with her
- She was guilty of promoting both physical adultery and spiritual adultery
- “She had apparently incited physical acts of adultery within the church, mimicking the paganism of that corrupt age. The idea that this woman was guilty of actual adultery is reinforced by Christ’s warning that

He would ‘throw her on a bed’...The sense is that she and all those who partook in her iniquity would be cast into hell together.”⁴

- There is a strong contrast between the luxurious “bed” on which her sins were committed and the “bed” on which she will experience judgment
- Christ also promised to “kill her children with pestilence,” likely a reference to Christ’s intent to kill, not her biological children, but those who followed her false teaching and debauched lifestyle
- Christ does not tolerate rampant sin in His church and will decisively judge those who willfully corrupt it with their sin

- In short, Christ would make an example out of the church in Thyatira (“and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts”)
- “There can be no hiding from Christ of any iniquity whether overt or covert act. These solemn words addressed to the church at Thyatira are applicable to anyone who dares to corrupt the purity of the truth of God and spoil the worship of the Lord with idolatrous and heathen practices.”⁵

- The implications of this are staggering for the church...God takes the purity of His church very seriously!
 - This is evident in Him putting to death Ananias and Sapphira when they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11)
 - This is evident in the fact that some in the Corinthians church who abused the Lord’s Supper were put to death (1 Cor 11:28-29)
 - This is evident in that there is a “sin leading to death” (1 John 5:16)
- “I don’t understand how pastors and churches can be indifferent to sin when they see this unequivocal statement from the Head of the church: that He will put on a public display of His holy wrath if a church falls into corruption. He will make a spectacle of His judgment, such that other congregations see it and cringe. He will use the failure and destruction of one church to purify others, and to display His holiness to His people. There is no excuse for tolerating sin or welcoming it as an evangelistic strategy. Doing so invites the wrath of heaven.”⁶

- This underscores the critical importance of:
 - Personal holiness on the part of individual believers
 - Church discipline as a regular practice to preserve the purity of Christ’s bride (Matt 18:15-18; 1 Cor 5:1-13)
 - Leaders who model godly conduct and exhort the body to do the same
 - Sound preaching and teaching which regularly calls the body to live in a manner worthy of Christ (Eph 4:1)

Counsel

Revelation 2:24-25 ~ 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.

- Here Christ gives a word of exhortation to the godly remnant in the church of Thyatira, implying that the rest of the church was apostate
- For the first time in the letters to the churches, a group is singled out within a local church as a godly remnant, as the true church within the false church

⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁵ John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 75

⁶ MacArthur, 116.

- The remnant is identified as “the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan”
- “the deep things of Satan” = an apt description of the true source behind all false religions and cults
- Christ is aware of the “burden” they are already facing, having to bear the weight of trying to live faithfully in such a corrupt church
- To this godly remnant, Christ gives the exhortation to “hold fast” to what they already have and know to be true
- They must steadfastly withstand the corrupting influences around them...they must resist the influence of the false teachers...they must hold up under the apostasy they found themselves in the midst of
- Notably, Christ urges them to hold fast “until I come,” a reference to His return
- “It is remarkable that here first in the seven churches there is a reference to the coming of Christ for His church as the hope of those who are engulfed by an apostate system.”⁷
- “The parallels between Thyatira and other apostate churches throughout church history are clear. Some compare Thyatira to believers in the Middle Ages when Protestantism separated from Roman Catholicism and attempted a return to purity in doctrine and life. The prominence of Jezebel as a woman prophetess is sometimes compared to the unscriptural exaltation of Mary. The participation in idolatrous feasts can illustrate the false teaching that the Lord’s Supper is another sacrifice of Christ. In spite of the apostasy of churches in the Middle Ages, there were churches then which, like the church of Thyatira, had some believers who were bright lights of faithfulness in doctrine and life.”⁸
- By way of implication:
 - The Lord knows who are His even if they are stuck in a sinful church...you are not alone!
 - Faithful believers in weak and failing churches should remain steadfast in the midst of such apostasy (or find another, more faithful church)

Comfort

Revelation 2:26-29 ~ 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.

- To those believers who faithfully bear up under corrupt and sinful churches, Christ promises them 2 things:
 1. Authority over the nations – this quote from Psalm 2:7-9 promises believers who are faithful that they will join Christ in His millennial rule (cf. 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 20:4-6); they will share the rule of Christ over the nations of the world
 2. The morning star – although not certain, this is likely a reference to Christ Himself (cf. Rev 22:16); while we have Christ in part now, we will receive Him in His fullness one day
- Thus, those who overcome will receive both the kingdom and the King!

⁷ Walvoord, 76.

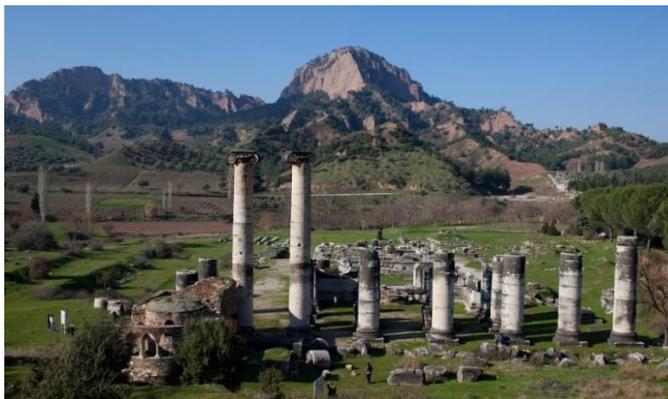
⁸ Walvoord, J. F. (1985). [Revelation](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 937). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS – THE DEAD CHURCH

Revelation 3:1-6

Background

- Once the capital of the province of Lydia, this city (modern village of Sart) was located in the Hermus River valley about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira
- Built on a large natural acropolis 1500 feet above the floor of the valley, Sardis was a wealthy city due to large deposits of gold and a robust textile, dyed wool, and jewelry trade
- A temple to Artemis (the goddess of love and fertility) existed in the city, a city where there were many mystery cults and secret religious society which all practiced pagan worship, including the worship of emperor Tiberius who rebuilt the city after an earthquake destroyed it in 17 AD
- Archeologists have located the ruins of a Christian church building next to the temple



Revelation 3:1 ~ To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.'

- Christ described himself as He who has:
 - The seven Spirits of God – similar to the description given in Rev 1:4; the Holy Spirit is in view here with an apparent allusion to the sevenfold character of the Holy Spirit as resting on Christ according to the prophecy of Isaiah 11:2-5 ~ The Spirit of the LORD...The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD; this is a way of understanding the Spirit in the fullness of His power and work (cf. Rev 5:6)
 - The seven stars – similar to the description given in Rev 1:20; the leaders of the each of the 7 churches are in view here; the fact that they are in His hand indicates that they are responsible and accountable directly to the Lord Himself; Christ is the One who sovereignly leads the church through His shepherds

- How does this description of Christ relate to the church at Sardis? → “Christ describes Himself as the One who possesses what this church needs most: the Holy Spirit and faithful shepherds. The church at Sardis had neither. They were devoid of the Holy Spirit and without spiritually qualified pastors. There was no godly leadership, the church was being led astray by men who did not know and love the truth. The life and power of the Holy Spirit was not there. The illuminating, enabling work of the Spirit had all but ceased. Without the Holy Spirit and without faithful leaders, the church was dead. It was a church dominated by the flesh, sin, and unbelief – and mostly populated by the unregenerate. The church at Sardis had desperate spiritual needs that only Christ could meet.”⁹
- Implications:
 - Only the Spirit of God can bring life to the people of God in the church of God
 - Godly spiritual leaders are critical to the spiritual life of the church

Condemnation

Revelation 3:1 ~ To the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.

- Contrary to Christ’s words to the rest of the churches, this letter is almost devoid of any word of commendation...it largely a letter of rebuke
- Rather than beginning with words of commendation as He has done previously, He begins immediately with words of condemnation: though they looked alive externally, they were dead internally
- They were spiritually lifeless and were a church that was Christian in name only
- Their nominal Christianity was evident in the fact that they were outwardly prosperous and busy with spiritual activity, but devoid of spiritual life
- Though the church looked alive to the naked eye, Christ could see through the façade to the true nature of their hearts: they were spiritually dead!
- Despite a few “deeds,” they were an ecclesiastical corpse, a spiritual graveyard, a church of living dead that needed the power of God to bring them back to life
- Like the Pharisees, their outer appearance was a facade hiding their lack of life (cf. Matt. 23:27–28)
- “The church at Sardis evidently had a reputation among the churches in the area and was considered a spiritual church and one that had an effective ministry and testimony for God. From the divine standpoint however, it is considered as a church that had only a name of being alive and actually was dead as far as spiritual life and power were concerned.”¹⁰
- Implications:
 - There are numerous “churches” today that are going through the motions but with no spiritual life inside
 - “In a sense, it is easy to spot a dead church. It’s a church that’s wrapped up in religious tradition practiced by rote but devoid of real faith. It’s concerned with liturgy and form, but not true worship. It’s a church consumed with healing social ills and promoting public welfare, but not preaching the power of the gospel to transform lives. It’s a church that tolerates sin rather than confronting it. It’s a church that is more interested in the fashions and opinions of men than the Word of God. It’s a church devoted to material things, even vaguely spiritual things but not the Scripture in its fullness. It’s a church that has no desire for holiness.”¹¹
 - There are a number of contributors to the death of a church: false teaching and doctrine...a toleration of sin...sinful leadership...compromise with the world...a steady influx of unbelievers

⁹ MacArthur, 125.

¹⁰ Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 80.

¹¹ MacArthur, 126.

Commands

Revelation 3:2-3 ~ Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. 3 So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

- Although the church was mostly dead, there were a few in the church who still had some spiritual life left in them; hence the command to “strengthen the things that remain”
- This call was meant to encourage those few remaining believers in Sardis to take action
- Christ issued them 5 commands to rescue them from their spiritual death spiral:
 1. Wake up – this jolting command was meant to shake them from their spiritual lethargy, to wake up spiritually
 2. Strengthen the things that remain – this was a call to salvage what remained of the dying church
 3. Remember what you have received and heard – this was a charge to think back on the truths from the Word they had been taught and to not let their hearts grow cold to it; a plea to recover the centrality and sufficiency of the Word in the life of their church if they hoped to rescue their dying church
 4. Keep it – it’s not enough to know the truth; it must be obeyed as well
 5. Repent – this was a call to confess sin and turn from it; they had to make a clean break from all patterns of sinfulness
- Failure to follow these instructions would result in Christ coming as a thief, meaning that He would come upon them unexpectedly, when they least expected it, with devastating suddenness to bring judgment on them
- Implications:
 - This is the only way back for all dead churches

Comfort

Revelation 3:4-6 ~ But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

- Christ encouraged the small group of faithful believers who remained, the “few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments,” a reference to the godly character and purity of those few believers
- There were a precious few who had not followed the church into sin and spiritual decay
- And, despite the church’s general state of spiritual deadness, God would not forget the faithful few there
- He promised them a number of blessings for remaining faithful:
 1. To be clothed in white garments – refers to God’s people made spiritually pure by Christ’s sacrifice (cf. Rev 3:18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:8, 14); a token of their acceptability to God on the basis of Christ’s imputed righteousness (2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9)
 2. To not erase their name from the book of life – cf. the frequent mention of “the book of life” in Revelation (13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27); this is not a reference to believers possibly losing their salvation as this is impossible (John 6:37, 39; 10:28-29; Rom 8:28-39); rather, this is a positive statement affirming that their names will not be erased
 3. To confess them before God and angels – this is a promise of assurance of salvation and eternity with Christ for all who remain faithful to Him (cf. Matt 10:32)

- “In keeping with the prophetic foreshadowing of the church age as seen in the other churches, some have held that the church at Sardis is a picture of the church in the time of the Protestant Reformation when a great mass of Christendom was dead even though it had a name that it lived. During those years only a small believing portion took their stand for true biblical revelation and trusted in Christ as Saviour. The characteristics of the church in Sardis remarkably parallel those of the church in the period of the Protestant Reformation. This fact seems to confirm the judgment that the message delivered to this first century church was prophetic of the future of the church at large during this period. The message is therefore a series of exhortations not only to the church of the first century but to those who need the same exhortations in every century.”¹²
- History bears evidence that perhaps the church at Sardis heard and heeded the warnings Christ gave them
- A faithful pastor named Melito, served as the bishop of Sardis, during the second century which likely indicates that revival came to this dead church
- Tradition says that he wrote the first ever commentary on Revelation

¹² Walvoord, 83.