

MESSAGE NOTES
Revelation Unveiled - Part 12
“Thyatira Part 2 - Understanding Revelation”
Revelation 2:18-29

Introduction: Apocalyptic literature is characterized by intense symbolism, visions, other worldly images and beasts. The Greek word *apokalypsis* means "revelation" or "unveiling". The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to unveil hidden spiritual realities and assure God's people who are oppressed or discouraged by what is happening in the world that God will ultimately triumph over evil. God's people need that encouragement because from the beginning of the Bible in Genesis, we see that the story of the Bible is the struggle between Empire controlled by Satan (one of God's created angels who rebelled against God), and The Kingdom of God (God's created order initially created in a state of total well-being (Shalom). This spiritual war has manifested itself since the early days of creation as Anti-God and Anti-Christian people and governments controlled by evil are seeking to destroy God's plan and God's people who live for him.

We saw that in our study of Daniel earlier this year. The empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and the Seleucids were ultimately judged by God and destroyed, In our study of Revelation, we will see the Roman Empire meet the same fate. Apocalyptic literature is meant to encourage the people of God to have hope in the midst of persecution from Empire; to persevere in being loyal and faithful to God no matter what Empire does to our physical life; to overcome because as Jesus says in John 16:33 – *In this world you will have trouble but take heart because I have overcome the world*. In other words, every anti-God empire will not survive as in the end, God will win.

Having said this, we know that much of the American Church believes Revelation is about the future and the “End Times.” As a result, people sometimes interpret it by trying to figure out what nations and people it is describing. Is there something about the future in Revelation? Yes. But it is not a futuristic book. Revelation speaks about the Past, Present, and Future. Anti-God empires and people will face God's judgment, and God's people will be with him for eternity. SO, persevere, remain loyal and faithful to Jesus, and OVERCOME.

This understanding of apocalyptic literature leads us to approach our study of Revelation from the perspective of what the original hearers heard as it was read to them in their church. We are approaching our study not from the view of our 21st century Western eyes, but from the way people in John's day interpreted what they heard. The Futuristic interpretation of Apocalyptic literature such as Daniel and Revelation was not developed until the 1830's by a man named John Nelson Darby and the Darbyite movement in England. It is not the understanding held by the Church throughout most of its history, and it is not the understanding of Christians around much of the world today.

Today, as we launch into the apocalyptic part of Revelation, I want to set the stage for our study of chapters 4-22 by looking again at one of the messages to the churches we already looked at several weeks ago. Jesus' message to the church in Thyatira is a wonderful example of what we are talking about in how to Understand Revelation. John is drawing on BOTH the CONTEXT of their culture and history, AND the Old Testament TEXT, and applying it to what they are experiencing in their day.

Thyatira is the smallest of the cities where the 7 churches are located. The city's population was estimated to be around 25,000 to 30,000 people. The city was on the main road and founded as a military outpost. It was a very blue-collar city – a hard-working city full of labor guilds. Archeologists found a list of the registered guilds when they excavated just a small part of the ancient city which is under a modern city now. It was a city built around industry and manufacturing. The guilds in the city included: leather workers, woodworkers, weavers, bakers, tailors, dyers, candlemakers, cobblers, potters, bronze smiths, blacksmiths, dyers of purple cloth, stone cutters, and slave merchants. These guilds were a combination of a labor union and a college fraternity. They had the brotherhood and the party of the fraternity, and the commitment to vocation and patronage system of a labor union. It was your economic security to be part of a guild.

The guilds had monthly celebrations usually around the time of the new moon and members would get together. Each guild had a god they served, and the city had a main god or two as well. When guild members got together for a Guild Feast, they would worship their god by gorging on raw meat that had the blood in it. This is a counterfeit of our communion meal as they believed that by doing this, they became one with the god when eating the meat and drinking the blood of the animal that had been sacrificed in worship to that god. They would also be drinking wine and getting drunk, and later in the evening, the feast would turn into sexual debauchery with the slaves from other countries being brought in for an orgy. The guild couches that had been used to eat and drink from now became the couches on which the orgies occurred. The Greek word for these couches is *kleine* from which we get the word recliner. With this background of the city in mind, let's look at Jesus' message to the Christian church in Thyatira.

Revelation 2:18-19...

CONTEXT: Jesus is using the context of the city in his message to the church. One of the leading guilds of Thyatira was an extensive network of bronze smiths who specialized in burnished bronze – the material used to produce the closest thing to mirrors that they had. Also, Jesus' words, "*your service and perseverance*" draws on the culture of the city – hardworking guild members, a military town, blue-collar. Another cultural reference in that this is the only place in the letters to the churches where Jesus refers to himself as the *Son of God*. Thyatira's chief God was Tyrinnos, the *son of Zeus*. He is such an obscure god to worship even though he later got merged in with Appollo worship. Some scholars have suggested it's because such a blue-collar city would have wanted to root for the underdog.

The reference to the *Son of God* is also because people worshipped the emperor as a god and as a way to honor Domitian who is the emperor at the time John writes Revelation, the city honored the very young son of Domitian who passed away while he was still an infant. Archeologists found in Thyatira, a description where the late son of Domitian is on the image of a coin and the child held the seven stars. The Seven Stars of the Plow (Ursa Major Constellation), were used by Greeks and Romans to track time and guide travelers on land and ships at sea at night. They said these stars can get you where you want to go and get you safely home. **By calling himself, *the Son of God*, Jesus is saying follow me, and I will get you safely home to me in the midst of persecution. I am the true son of God – NOT Tyrinnos or Domitian's son.**

TEXT: Not only does John use their context, he also draws on the Old Testament text by describing Jesus using the same image that Daniel 10 uses to describe God. By doing this, he is reminding the church that the theme of the book of Daniel is: *In spite of present circumstances, God is in control*. The story of Daniel is a story of perseverance through persecution, and that is what the Christians in Thyatira are going through. Jesus is saying, persevere in the midst of whatever you are going through as God's people.

Revelation 2:20-25...

CONTEXT: There was a Jewish prophetess who operated a Sybil shrine in Thyatira and her name was Sambathe. Rome had four main oracles located in different areas of the empire. Oracles were a woman who people would go to when they were wanting a word from the gods. People who were wanting a word from a god would invest a lot of their time and money to travel and to give as a gift at the temple of the oracle. They would then go through some rituals prior to seeing the priest of the pagan god, who would bring their question to the oracle. People might wait a day, a week, a month, even up to a year to receive the word the oracle received from the underworld.

Because there were only 4 main oracles in the empire, a Sybil was like a minor league oracle and they were located all over the empire. They were generally girls who were from families who would give their young daughter to the temple and they would be in a poppy drug induced state from a young age and trained by the pagan priest. It was a satanic practice involving real spiritual power that dealt in witchcraft and satanism. People who couldn't afford to travel to an oracle, or if their question wasn't a big enough deal that they wanted to go all the way to a main Oracle, would go to a Sybil. Sambathe was a Sybil in Thyatira who was a big proponent of the Roman Guilds that powered the local labor force, and encouraged people into idolatry and sexual immorality.

Jesus uses a code name to reference Sambathe as he says to the church: "*You tolerate that woman, Jezebel. She misleads my servants into the sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols...I will cast her on a bed of suffering.*" The Greek word used here is *kline* – a guild couch. He also says, "*I will strike her children dead.*" This could be a possible reference to the dead child of Domitian, or it could mean her followers. When Jesus speaks of "Satan's so-called deep secrets," he may be referring to Sambathe channeling messages from Apollo, the god of the underworld to people who were going to the Sybil.

TEXT: Jesus draws on the Old Testament by using the name, Jezebel, to talk about Sambathe. Jezebel also led God's people astray and into idolatry and sexual immorality. King Solomon opened the door to this long before Jezebel, when he began a relationship with Hiram, the king of Phoenicia. Solomon did not let the Hebrew bronze smiths and stone cutters work on the temple being built but outsourced the work by giving the Phoenicians twenty towns in the Galilee as payment for the labor of his best bronze smiths and stone cutters. This agreement paved the way for the Phoenician-Israelite relationship which would eventually culminate in the later treaties Omri and Ahab made with the Phoenician kings. One of those treaties included the marriage of Ahab to the Phoenician high priestess of Asherah, a woman by the name of Jezebel. Jezebel brought Asherah worship to Israel. Asherah was connected to Baal worship which involved idolatry, shrine prostitutes, looking to Asherah for fertility, and child sacrifice. Israel marries their King Ahab to Jezebel, the high priestess of Asherah worship on purpose because of political concerns and wanting to keep the relationship between the two countries strong.

The reference in Revelation 2 to "*Jezebel who misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.*" is a fitting reference to Sambathe. Jesus says: "*I will cast her on a bed of suffering...*" Jezebel was killed in the Old Testament by being cast out of a window. Jesus says, "*I will strike her children dead,*". Jezebel's

children were all struck dead. This entire teaching is pulled perfectly not just from the context of the city of Thyatira, but also from the text to show how God will bring judgment on evil and the suffering it causes. In the end, God will always overcome. So, we can persevere, have hope, remain loyal to Jesus, and OVERCOME.

NOTE: This pattern of CONTEXT and TEXT is found throughout the apocalyptic literature in Revelation 4-22.

Revelation 2:26-29...

CONTEXT: The reference to pottery dashed to pieces is a reference to the end of the guilds and their evil as in the end Jesus will overcome those who are opposed to Him and His people. Those who are faithful to Jesus will one day rule and reign with Him. *"I will also give that one the morning star"* has a cultural meaning that we they would also overcome the worship of Domitian and his son who supposedly holds the stars and the way home to eternal life.

TEXT: *"I will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery."* is a direct reference to Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is also written about the one who God says, *"You are my son."* The Son-of-God Psalm is being referenced in the only letter to the 7 churches which mentions the Son of God. Another interesting connection is that while the Psalm is used by God to prophetically point to the Son of God (Jesus), when David is writing it he doesn't know that and so who is talking about when he says, *"You are my son."*? It is Solomon – the guy who is responsible for starting the whole mess surrounding Jezebel.

I hope this is starting to sink in and take root in our consciousness as to what John is doing here through the inspiration of Jesus. He is using the context of their culture and the biblical text simultaneously at the same time with the same words. It's not like half of the sentence is about the Text and half of the sentence is about Context. The same sentence is simultaneously pulled from the Text and speaks to the Context of their culture perfectly. It's brilliant!

We see this as well in the reference to the *morning star*, which in the culture speaks about Domitian and his son who is holding the star – meaning that Domitian's son has the power to guide you home to eternal safety if you worship him? The reference to *the Morning Star* and *the iron scepter* in that context are about Domitian's son and the guilds. But the text is also directly from Numbers 24 in the last oracle of Balaam. The connection between Balaam and Thyatira is God's people being drawn into idolatry and sexual immorality. Balaam advises Balak the King of the Moabites to entice God's people, the Israelites, to idolatry and sexual sin through the use of prostitutes. In pronouncing judgment on evil and empire, God intervenes over Satan and speaks through the oracle of Baalam. **See Numbers 24:17b-19...**

NOTE: So much of this gets lost when we read Revelation from the Futuristic interpretation. Let's take what we are learning today into our study of the Book of Revelation through the end of the year.

APPLICATION: Beyond interpreting and understanding Revelation the way the early church did, what is an application or takeaway for us today in Jesus' words to the church at Thyatira?

Like the church in Thyatira, we live in a world that tempts us to compromise God's values and standards and give into the values and standards of the world. Jesus' complaint is that some in Thyatira are compromising when it comes to what they worship and when it comes to God's standards of sexual ethics and morality. There is a movement in the church at Thyatira to rationalize and tolerate sin.

Our temptations are the same today. We are tempted to compromise God's values and standards and *"Go along to Get along"* and not lose the approval of people, relationships, business opportunities, grades at school, etc. We are also tempted to worship the idols of Money, Possessions, Success, Sports, Hobbies, and place those things first in our life over our relationship with God. Likewise, in our sexualized society where temptation is all around us, it is easy to give into those temptations with our eyes, our thought life, even physically. You see, the voice of Jezebel is not silent in our day any more than it was in John's day. We can count on that voice whispering to us to choose something other than God's values and standards of ethics that are in The 10 Commandments & The Sermon on The Mount (Matthew 5-7).

Where have you and I been compromising in our life? God does not excuse us because we live in a permissive generation. He does not excuse us anymore than He excused the Empires of the past. So, Jesus through the Apostle John says to the church at Thyatira and to the Church of Jesus Christ today that there is only one solution for this, and that is a no tolerance policy in our life for compromise. There are two roads we can take in life. We can take the road of our Culture OR we can take the road of Christ. Will we follow the Christ of Culture OR the Christ of the Scripture?

IF we want to follow the Christ of the Scripture, then you and I need to live by the TEXT. There is a reason Jesus through John speaks to the Church at Thyatira about the Culture in which they live and pairs that with the Text of God's word. IT IS BECAUSE WE HAVE A CHOICE TO MAKE. To live for the Christ of Scripture, you and I have to have the text in us. **I pray we will repent of compromise and sin, and live into Romans 12:1-2... Let us put God's Word into our minds to help change the way we think, and transform us to become like Jesus.**