

Lesson 5
Revelation 2:18 - 29

Christ and the Churches – Thyatira, the corrupted church

Memory verse: "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." Daniel 12:3

Thyatira was a wealthy town in the northern part of Lydia of the Roman province of Asia, on the river Lycus. It stood so near to the borders of Mysia, that some of the early writers have regarded it as belonging to that country. Its early history is not well known, for until it was refounded by Seleucus Nicator (301-281 BC) it was a small, insignificant town. It stood on none of the Greek trade routes, but upon the lesser road between Pergamum and Sardis, and derived its wealth from the Lycus valley in which it rapidly became a commercial centre, but never a metropolis. The name "Thyatira" means "the castle of Thya." Other names which it has borne are Pelopia and Semiramis. Before the time of Nicator the place was regarded as a holy city, for there stood the temple of the ancient Lydian sun-god, Tyrimnos; about it games were held in his honour. Upon the early coins of Thyatira this Asiatic god is represented as a horseman, bearing a double-headed battle-axe, similar to those represented on the sculptures of the Hittites. A goddess associated with him was Boreatene, a deity of less importance. Another temple at Thyatira was dedicated to Sambethe, and at this shrine was a prophetess, by some supposed to represent the Jezebel of Rev 2:20, who uttered the sayings which this deity would impart to the worshippers.

Thyatira was specially noted for the trade guilds which were probably more completely organized there than in any other ancient city. Every artisan belonged to a guild, and every guild, which was an incorporated organization, possessed property in its own name, made contracts for great constructions, and wielded a wide influence. Powerful among them was the guild of coppersmiths; another was the guild of the dyers, who, it is believed, made use of the madder-root instead of shell-fish for making the purple dyestuffs. A member of this guild seems to have been Lydia of Thyatira, who, according to Acts 16:14, sold her dyes in Philippi. The colour obtained by the use of this dye is now called Turkish red. 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. According to Acts 19:10, Paul may have preached there while he was living at Ephesus, but this is uncertain; yet Christianity reached there at an early time. It was taught by many of the early church that no Christian might belong to one of the guilds, and thus the greatest opposition to Christianity was presented.

Thyatira is now represented by the modern town of Ak-Hissar on a branch line of the Manisa-Soma Railroad, and on the old Rom road 9 hours from Sardis. Ak-Hissar is Turkish for "white castle," and near the modern town may be seen the ruins of the castle from which the name was derived. The village is of considerable size; most of the houses are of mud, but several of the buildings erected by Caracalla are still standing, yet none of them are perfect. In the higher part of the town are the ruins of one of the pagan temples, and in the walls of the houses are broken columns and sarcophagi and inscribed stones. The population of 20,000 is largely Greek and Armenian, yet a few Jews live among them. Before the town is a large marsh, fever-laden, and especially unhealthy in the summer time, formed by the Lycus, which the Turks now call Geurdeuk Chai. The chief modern industry is rug-making.

The longest message was sent to the church in the smallest city! In Romans time, Thyatira was a military town as well as a commercial centre with many trade guilds. Wherever guilds were found, idolatry and immorality—the two great enemies of the early church—were almost always present too. The city boasted a special temple to Apollo, the "sun god," which explains why the Lord introduced Himself as "the Son of God" (the only time in Revelation this title is used). John had to deliver a message of severe warning and judgment to this congregation, which explains the description of the Lord's eyes and feet.

Things to learn: 1) Love without doctrinal purity 2) the evils of false teachings 3) God's character and His kingdom

Discussion questions:

Q1 What is the difference between the church of Ephesus and Thyatira which was commended by the Lord saw (vv 18 and 19)?

Q2 Consider what got the Thyatira church into such a state whereby it invoked the judgment and warning from Jesus in spite of His commendation?

Q3 How much do we know about the character of God and His Kingdom in this passage?