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December 10th: Psalm 103 & Revelation 2:18—3:6

December 9, 2020



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Messages to Thyatira and Sardis.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Psalm 103 of David. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me. Bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good, so that your youth is renewed like the eagles. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward

those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

For he knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field, for the wind passes over it and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all. Blessed the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers who do his will.

Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Revelation chapter 2 verse 18 to chapter 3 verse 6. And to the angel of the church in Tharathyra write, the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works. And I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come, the one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end. To him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my father.

And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Yet you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments. And they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.

I will confess his name before my father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The fourth and the fifth messages to the churches are to Thyatira and Sardis, coming at the end of Revelation chapter 2 and the beginning of Revelation chapter 3. There is a repeated pattern for all of these messages.

First, the angel of the church in so-and-so write. Second, thus says he who some element of Revelation chapter 1. Third, I know your some characteristics or actions of the church. Fourth, but this I have against you.

Fifth, some command to repent and to amend their ways. Sixth, whoever has ears let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. And then finally, seventh, to those who conquer and some promise of gift or reward.

The messages to the churches both pick up elements of the opening vision of chapter 1 and anticipate later parts of the book. They are like miniature apocalypses preparing us for the greater apocalypse that is addressed to a final city, the city of Jerusalem. There are structures of seven throughout the book.

Seven messages to the churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. These are structures of creation, seven days of creation and structures of recreation. Is there any discernible order to the messages? There seems to be illusions within them that move us through different periods of redemptive history.

Eden, Joseph, the manor, high priest's garments, Balaam and Balak. And having gone through these elements in the previous three letters, in Thyatira we arrive in the Kingdom Era with David and Jezebel. Sardis is the period of the exile and the remnant with the soil garments of the high priest.

Beale notes that we can observe concentric patterns of faithfulness and unfaithfulness in the ordering of the messages. The two outside messages, numbers 1 and 7 to Ephesus and Laodicea, are to churches in danger of losing their status as churches. The churches in positions 2 and 6, Smyrna and Philadelphia, receive very positive messages praising them for their faithfulness.

The three central messages, Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis, positions 3 to 5, receive messages that are a mixture of praise and rebuke. Besides the ways in which the churches are ordered in literary and symbolic ways, there is a very practical ordering of them in terms of the most direct journey that a person bearing the book of Revelation

from Patmos would take to reach all of the cities of the churches to which the book is addressed. Such a messenger would begin with Ephesus, the nearest of the churches to Patmos, head north to Smyrna, then Pergamum, travel east inland to Thyatira, south to Sardis, then further east to Philadelphia, then southeast to Laodicea, the final city on the itinerary.

Thyatira is the fourth church in the sequence. There are elements of the vision of chapter 1 here at the very outset, the Son of God with eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze. Christ here is like the figure in Daniel's vision by the River Tigris in Daniel chapter 10 verse 6. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.

As usual, the interpretation of Revelation depends very heavily upon our knowing the rest of the scriptures, perhaps especially books like Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. If we do not know these exceedingly well and pay very close attention to the patterns and connections internal to the book itself, we will struggle to understand. Without such knowledge of the scriptures and attention to the text before us, we really won't know where to start when we hit the sort of complicated and obscure visionary passages that we encounter in the book of Revelation.

The meaning of these is not arbitrary or impressionistic, rather we generally find reliable keys to their interpretation within the scriptures themselves. When people have failed to read Revelation on its own scriptural terms, it can soon become a sort of Rorschach inkblot in which the reader will discern their own psychological projections and fancies. Deeply acquainting ourselves with scriptural symbolism will protect us from falling for this error.

The book of Revelation also reveals the immense power of scriptural symbolism, its profound coherence and intricacy. Symbolism, as we have already seen, is not code. When trying to decipher a code, we are typically looking for one-to-one correlations.

This is not the case with scriptural symbolism. The strength of scriptural symbolism is seen in its capacity to connect and unfold its reference, associating them with other elements, causing them to operate on different levels of meaning, adding various enriching counter melodies, ordering them within significant patterns and motifs, juxtaposing them with other things in illuminating relations of similarity and difference, and many other such things. Much of the meaning of scripture more generally is communicated on this level, but this is much more the case in a text like Revelation.

We should take skills of reading that we have practiced elsewhere in the scriptures to Revelation, and take the skills that we learn or develop in reading Revelation back to the rest of the scriptures. Jesus is the one who walks amidst the lampstands, like God walked in the midst of the Garden of Eden. He tends the lampstands like a gardener tends trees.

The angels or messengers of the churches seem to be responsible to tend the lampstands, which each bear the divided flame of the sevenfold spirit of Pentecost. The lampstands have seven branches and there are seven of them. Once again we see the importance of this specific number.

Here Jesus praises the angel of Thyatira for his works, expressed in four different ways, his love, his faith, his service, and his patient endurance. Indeed, in contrast to the angel of Ephesus, who had abandoned his first love, the angel of Thyatira's latter works have exceeded his first. However, the message to Thyatira has a very serious accusation against the angel, who has been far too tolerant and has allowed a woman, whom Christ calls Jezebel, to seduce his servants to sin.

The historical character of Jezebel in 1st and 2nd Kings is very important to understand if we're going to read this passage. The wife of King Ahab of Israel, she was famous for persecuting and killing the prophets. She seduced Ahab and Israel to idolatry, to the service of Baal.

She was a bloodthirsty woman who killed the servants of God, and later on we have another related woman called Athaliah, who leads the people of God to unfaithfulness again, and also destroys the seed in 2nd Kings. Jehu's word to Joram in 2nd Kings chapter 9 verse 22 concerning Jezebel is important to consider here. What peace can there be so long as the whorings and sorceries of your mother Jezebel are so many? Jezebel here is spoken of in ways that connect with adultery and also with idolatry.

She anticipates in the later chapters of the book of Revelation the whore of Babylon, the wicked, bloodthirsty, idolatrous and adulterous queen who will suffer a gruesome end being consumed by beasts. That's what happened to the original Jezebel. There is some pattern of that in this Jezebel and this will also be the fate of the character of the whore of Babylon, who is a third Jezebel.

The angel is supposed to be a guardian of the bride. He's supposed to be a guardian of the people of God and defend them against such seduction. Paul describes himself in this way in 2nd Corinthians chapter 11 verses 2 to 3 For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. Jezebel's sin is here presented in sexualized terms. Idolatry and fornication have deep affinities.

A good example of this being the story of Israel yoking itself to Baal of Peor in Numbers chapter 25. Many have also connected this with the original Jezebel who's both the idolatrous queen and also the one who leads people astray by her wiles. The one who wields power through her wifely influence over her husband Ahab and the one who paints her face before Jehu puts her to death, perhaps hoping that seduction will save

her from her fate.

This Jezebel fancies herself a prophetess and teaches people within the church. The character of Jezebel in the Old Testament is the wife of a failed guardian of the nation, Ahab. Elsewhere in the New Testament there are limits placed upon women teaching and exercising authority over men in the church and upon their involvement in the judging of prophecy.

The character of Jezebel invites us to reflect upon this a bit more. She seems to be someone who's exercising some sort of authority and teaching within the church. There are clearly prophetesses who are presented in a positive way in Scripture.

We could think about Deborah or we could think about Huldah or we could think about the four daughters of Philip. However the figure of the prophetess has often been a dangerous one in church history, a figure whose supposed charismatic authority has been at the heart of a number of heretical movements such as the Montanists. The prophetess could represent a sort of ecstatic and charismatic authority that was seen to override the authority of the appointed guardians of the church and the rule of orthodoxy.

Perhaps something along that lines had occurred in Thyatira. The messenger of the church, the angel that's appointed to guard it, had failed somehow to adequately test and judge prophets both male and female and as a result this one particular prophetess was causing all sorts of mayhem within the church. The angel of Thyatira has failed in his tolerance.

We might here think of Deuteronomy chapter 13 where one of the virtues required of the children of Israel when faced with a false teacher, a false prophet who would lead them astray to serve other gods, is not to pity, to be willing to take firm and decisive action in judging that person and removing them entirely from the congregation, not showing any mercy on account of them being a family member or a close friend. This is one of the virtues that is especially important for guardians of the church. The angel of the church in Thyatira is responsible to protect the congregation from wolves like this Jezebel character and if he does not do so he will have to be removed.

The two sins in question here, sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols, were both condemned in the Jerusalem Council. Jezebel's sin is presented as a sort of spiritual seduction involving actual encouragement to, and excusing of, fornication. Her sin is associated with the bed, with physical and spiritual sins of adultery.

In a punishment befitting the crime she will be cast onto a bed of sickness. Those who follow her teachings, described as those committing adultery with her, will be thrown into tribulation. Unless they repent they will be killed with death.

This intensification of the notion of death is something that might bring to mind the warning in Genesis chapter 2 connected with the forbidden fruit, dying you shall die. While the faithful minister teaches the deep things of God, an expression used in places like 1st Corinthians chapter 2 verse 10, Jezebel by contrast teaches the deep things of Satan. She is an adulterous minister of the servant, a serpentine form of Eve willfully tempting Adam with the fruit.

The faithful in Thyatira don't have a further burden laid upon them but the angel must remove Jezebel and her followers. As the woman in question is called Jezebel, the angel of Thyatira is being invited to take up the mantle of Elijah, Elisha and Jehu. The one who overcomes here is promised an authority that's reminiscent of that of the Davidic King in Psalm 2 verses 7 to 9. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

The faithful servant shares in the rule of his master. We might here recall the parable of the miners in Luke chapter 19 in which the faithful servants are rewarded with rule over cities, sharing in the authority of the nobleman who has gone away to receive a kingdom. The faithful servant is also promised the morning star which Christ himself is characterized as in Revelation chapter 22 verse 16.

In receiving the morning star which is described as rising in the hearts of the faithful in 2nd Peter chapter 1 verse 19, the faithful share in Christ's own authority. Once again the imagery here as we've been moving through the story of the Scriptures is associated with the era of the kingdom. It's positive imagery in contrast to the negative imagery of the figure of Jezebel.

Sardis is the fifth church. Christ is here described as the one with the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Once again this is drawing upon the vision of chapter 1. Peter Lighthouse writes concerning these details.

At the end of Revelation heavenly lights descend to earth as the light of the Lamb which is also the light of the bride. Even at the beginning the earthly stars or lamps shine because they participate in the heavenly lamps of the Spirit. The heavenly temple has lampstands burning with the Spirit.

The earthly temple of the church also has seven lights burning by the Spirit. Prosaically the light of the Spirit in heaven shines through the church's pastors and overseers. All this is in the right hand of Jesus.

His hand is full of the Spirit and he holds the churches and their angels in his strong right hand. In the power of that Spirit. The church in Sardis is not what they appear or they are presumed to be.

Fittingly given the introductory focus upon light bearing the church fails by not being

people of the light and by being awake. They seem alive like people of the day but they are really dead and asleep. Their master Jesus died but is alive forevermore but they are in something akin to the opposite position.

Seeming alive but in fact being dead. Christ is coming like a thief and they must be prepared. It's worth considering the use of the language here of the Olivet Discourse and how much the Olivet Discourse lies behind the book of Revelation.

The Gospel of John does not record the Olivet Discourse but the book of Revelation could be considered John's Olivet Discourse. Luke chapter 12 verses 35 to 40 has many details in common with the statement given to the church in Sardis. If he comes in the second watch or in the third and finds them awake, blessed are those servants.

But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Once again, the message to Sardis anticipates elements of the larger message of the book, as each of the messages to the seven churches is a refraction of the total message of the book.

We can see this in Revelation chapter 16 verse 15. We have three elements here that remind us of the message to the church in Sardis. The reference to coming like a thief, the reference to staying awake and also the importance of the garments.

Some at Sardis have been faithful, but others have soiled their garments. We might consider the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew chapter 22 as a text with some affinities to this. The king inspects the guests that have been invited and finds one without a wedding garment and he is judged by being cast out.

There are various references to wedding garments and white robes later on in the book of Revelation, chapter 7 verses 13 to 14 for instance. Then one of the elders addressed me saying, Who are these clothed in white robes and from where have they come? I said to him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are those coming out of the great tribulation.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. We see it again in Revelation chapter 19 verses 7 to 8. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

In these texts we see two different aspects of the white garments. On one level they represent the deeds of the people wearing them, but in another respect they are given to the wearers. They are also washed in the blood of the Lamb.

They represent the deeds of the wearer, but the deeds of the wearer have been washed

and cleansed. There might also be a reference here back to Zechariah chapter 3 verses 1 to 7. Remove the filthy garments from him. And I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.

Besides being clothed in white garments, the one who conquers is promised that his name will not be blotted out of the Book of Life. Although there is here a promise that the name will not be blotted out, it implies that names could be blotted out. The Book of Life in question is quite likely a sort of historical document, a sort of genealogical record of those who belong to the people of God.

The final promise given to the one who overcomes is that Christ will confess his name before his Father and also before the angels. Here we might think of Matthew chapter 10 verses 32 to 33. So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.

But whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. A question to consider. Where else in scripture do we have a reference to someone being blotted out of God's book? Is there any way in which it might help us to understand what's being spoken of here?