

Great Controversy Series

18 The Seven Churches as Prophecy

When we began the Great Controversy Series, we began with Jesus' sermon in chapter 24 of Matthew. While Jesus was describing the signs of the end of the world, He explained important events from His own time to the end of the world. One of them was the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. After this, Jesus said:

Matthew 24:9 "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake.

Matthew 24:21 "For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.²² "And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

The first large persecution of Jesus' followers was made by pagan Rome. Christians' property was confiscated and they were thrown into prison. They were tortured and thrown to wild animals in the theaters or burned alive. Some were crucified. While they were dying onlookers laughed and clapped. From the time of the emperor Nero to 313 AD when the Edict of Milan made Christianity a recognized religion, the persecution continued.

But paganism didn't die. When Christianity became an honorable religion, people who were not devoted to Jesus joined the church for worldly benefits. Christianity became corrupt and doctrines and ceremonies from paganism came in. Worse, the spirit of paganism came to the church. God's love and character were not clearly seen.

Faithful believers resisted these negative developments. Because these people lived a pure and clean Christianity they were persecuted by the church.

Daniel 7:25 He shall speak *pompous* words against the Most High, Shall persecute the saints of the Most High, And shall intend to change times and law. Then *the saints* shall be given into his hand For a time and times and half a time.

The papacy persecuted Christians who did not recognize its authority. This period would last a time, times and half a time or three and one half years. You remember that in symbolic prophecy a day represents a year when.....and every year is twelve 30-day years. Thus 360 days times 3 make 1080 days. We add a half a year that is 180 days and we get a total of 1260 days.

Revelation 12:6 Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

The church, which is represented by a woman, escaped from the papacy. For hundreds of years, people like the Waldensians witnessed to the truth in secret. They copied Bible, which was forbidden, by hand and distributed it. Other dissenters appeared. John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English and pointed out the abuses of the papacy. Church leaders took him to court and tried to have him executed. Huss and Jerome were burned at the stake in Bohemia. Luther's writings were forbidden. Millions of Protestants were executed. But as the Bible said, persecution would last 1260 years while reform was forbidden. This period would last from the time the papacy came to full power in 538 until 1798. In 1798 the French general Berthier captured the pope and the time of persecution came to an end. But Jesus said, "'And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.'" The Protestant Reformation shortened the time of persecution.

These are huge events. As we saw, the Bible portrays these events in broad strokes. But does the Bible show these in a more detailed fashion? I say yes. Today, I want to show the seven churches as prophecy Later I want to show the seven seals as prophecy

In the book of Revelation in the second and third chapters, the prophet John wrote the seven messages that came from Jesus to the seven churches. The seven cities of the churches are in what is now Turkey's Aegean region. They are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Some of the names you recognize. You know Ephesus and probably Pergamum. Smyrna is modern Izmir, Thyatira is modern Akhisar, Sardis is modern Salihli, Philadelphia is Alaşehir and Laodicea is in Denizli.

These seven messages were written to the seven churches in John's time. These seven messages which address the churches' situations are full of words of admonition, warning and encouragement from Jesus. These messages are valid for us because we can encounter the problems they faced and their situations.

Through the centuries Bible students have found another dimension in these messages. The messages are not only for the situation of the churches of John's day but also describe seven large time periods of God's people. Perhaps the easiest way to explain what I mean is to dive into the subject.

Revelation 2:1 "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ' These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: ²"I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; ³ "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. ⁴ "Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵ "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent. ⁶ "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the

Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." '

In the time of Jesus and His apostles, the church was relatively pure and good. The followers of Jesus recognized heresies and false apostles and rejected them. Here the Nicolaitans are spoken about. Who was Nicolas? In the second century Irenaeus, who was probably born in Izmir and later worked as a pastor in France said that the Nicolaitans claimed to be Christian but did not refrain from adultery and eating food sacrificed to idols. As we look at the seven church as symbolic historical periods, we will look at the sins of the Nicolaitans symbolically. That is, the apostolic church stood firm against immorality. They kept the Ten Commandments.

The believers suffered in that period. The believers of Jewish background were thrown out of the synagogues and the believers from a pagan background were made fun of and thrown from society. They were hardened from always having to defend their faith and Jesus said, "You have lost your first love."

The second period of the church begins with the message to Smyrna or Izmir.

Revelation 2:8 " And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ' These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: ⁹ "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and *I know* the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰ "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." '

The church of Smyrna would be persecuted and Jesus encourages the believers. As a local church we now that a bishop named Polycarp was put to death. Some others were also executed. Sometimes the Jews enticed the Roman authorities against the believers. As a local situation we know that the message to the church in Izmir is correct. But in Christian history, after the time of Jesus and the apostles was there a time of large persecution? Did we see a time of persecution in the Great Controversy sermon series?

Certainly we did. You remember that the first persecutions, in a large measure, came from paganism. Christianity's expansion was a large threat to paganism. Beginning with Nero, large persecutions occurred on and off for centuries. Believers were clothed in skins of wild animals to be torn by dogs in the amphitheater. They were crucified and burned alive. Their property was confiscated and they lived in the catacombs in Rome.

The message to the Smyrna church talks about a 10 day persecution. Although that would be bad, a ten day period is not that long. But if we apply the year-day principle, what will happen. In history was there a ten-year period of heavy persecution against Christians?

You remember that in the third sermon of the Great Controversy series we read a selection from Wikipedi (<https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diocletianus>):

According to Christian sources in the first years of Diocletian's reign Galerius incited the persecution. But Diocletian also appropriated the persecution with equal pleasure. In the years 299 -300 Christianity was accused of being the reason that an appropriate prophecy could not be received from sacrifice to the gods. Diocletian said that if any Christian state official or soldier would not participate in the sacrifices they would lose their positions. In this period a prophecy from Apollo in Didim was interpreted that the Christians should be persecuted.

On February 24, 303 Diocletian made the first decree against the Christians. According to this all Christian books and places of worship in the empire were to be destroyed. It was outlawed for Christians to come together for worship. After a fire in the palace in Nicomedia and uprisings in Anatolia, Diocletian made harsher restrictions against Christians and ordered the arrest of all church leaders. All captives could be released if they would demonstrate their rejection of Christianity by making sacrifice to the gods. This persecution was most keenly felt in the eastern portion of the empire and continued until 313. This was the year that the Edict of Milan was put into effect by Constantine and Licinius.

According to one estimate during this time 3000-3500 Christians were killed. Others were thrown into prison and tortured. The persecution was so intense that the Alexandrian church reckoned Diocletian's reign as the Time of Martyrs. One result of the persecution was that a man named Marinus escaped to the Titano mountain and founded the Marino republic.

No one knows how many people were killed. Some estimates are higher than that one in the article we just read. For ten years the Time of the Martyrs was experienced. Using the day-year principle, the Time of the Martyrs corresponds to the prediction given to the Smyrna church.

Revelation 2:12 " And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ' These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³"I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne *is*. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas *was* My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. ¹⁶ 'Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of

My mouth. ¹⁷ "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it. " "

In the church at Pergamum both from a doctrinal and practical standpoint corruption begins and Jesus reprimands them. We see the Nicolaitans again. In the Old Testament Balaam tempted the Israelites. When we consider the Nicolaitans and Balaam symbolically what conclusion do we arrive at?

In the Old Testament when God's people entered into religious and political alliance with pagans this was described with the symbol of adultery. For example, in the following verses the Lord is speaking with Israel through the prophet:

Ezekiel 16:15 " But you trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who *would have it*. ¹⁶ "You took some of your garments and adorned multicolored high places for yourself, and played the harlot on them. *Such things should not happen, nor be.* ¹⁷ "You have also taken your beautiful jewelry from My gold and My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself male images and played the harlot with them. ¹⁸ "You took your embroidered garments and covered them, and you set My oil and My incense before them.

According to the Scriptures, when God's people do pagan practices, this is spiritual adultery and harlotry.

When Constantine made Christianity a recognized religion, the church began to be corrupted. Unconverted people joined the church for worldly gain and they brought pagan ceremonies and teachings with them. From 313 when Christianity began to be a recognized religion until the time of the establishment of the papacy, this period is described well by the message given to the church in Pergamum. Unfortunately this situation, as bad as it was, would only get worse.

Revelation 2:18 " And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, ' These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: ¹⁹ ¶ "I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and *as for your works, the last are more than the first.* ²⁰ "Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. ²¹ "And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. ²² "Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. ²³ "I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. ²⁴ "Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. ²⁵ "But hold fast what you have till I come. ²⁶ "And he who overcomes, and

keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations --²⁷ 'He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels' -- as I also have received 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." '

Thyratira is only 1 ½ hours by car from Izmir and is modern-day Akhisar. The message to the church in Thyratira is not very pleasant. In Pergamum there were those who were adherents of the doctrines of Balaam and Nicolas. But in Thyratira the church permits the false prophet Jezebel. It means the level of corruption has come to a higher level.

Who was Jezebel? How shall we interpret her symbolically?

Jezebel in the Old Testament was the wife of king Ahab. Jezebel was the daughter of the pagan king of Tyre and she brought pagan priests to Israel and directed most of the Israelites to the immoral worship of Baal. In 538 when the papacy was firmly established, the corruption of the church gained speed.

Paul wrote:

2 Thessalonians 2:3 Let no one deceive you by any means; for *that Day will not come* unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition,⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

This falling away is of course the corruption of Christianity. The man of sin is the pope. In the days when the papacy was dominant, before the Protestant Reformation, the salvation in Christ was buried under ceremonies and traditions from paganism and false doctrines invented by people. Priests usurped the place where Jesus should be and they sold salvation to people for money. With the church's permission idols were worshiped and the Sabbath was trampled on. Jesus gave space for the church to repent but it did not repent. There were good people in the church and Jesus said to them, "'Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden."²⁵ "But hold fast what you have till I come."

Of course there was great persecution during this time. The persecution of Christians by the pagans was small compared to the persecution by the papacy. This persecution we will see more clearly in the seven seals. Let's leave the seven churches as symbolic time periods for now. We reviewed 4 churches, we will look at the others later.

The Bible predicted these events, sometimes openly, sometimes symbolically through different prophets. You can trust the word of God.