

Thyatira: The Once and Future King

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[0 : 00] So as we all know, the United Kingdom has a king. But day to day, we don't tend to give King Charles that much thought because he is a figurehead with little real power.

But by contrast, the Bible speaks about a king who is much more than a figurehead, one who has divine power. This king is, of course, as we've already thought about as we've been going through our service and our time together, this king is Jesus.

The Bible speaks frequently about his reign and his kingdom. Jesus, when he was on earth, taught that the kingdom of heaven had arrived in him.

In the last week of his life, he entered Jerusalem, fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy that Jerusalem's king would come to her riding on a donkey. And Jesus was crucified with the title King of the Jews nailed above his head.

And after his resurrection from the dead, he ascended into heaven to receive a kingdom from his father. And in the very first chapter of Revelation, John describes Jesus as the ruler of the kings of the earth.

[1 : 11] And so really, the story of the gospel is the story that the king has come. He's brought about the kingdom of heaven by defeating sin, death, and the devil on the cross and in his resurrection.

And he reigns now in heaven as we, his church, follow him and tell the story of the king's victory and the hope that we have in the kingdom. Now, this letter that Jesus sends to the Christians in Thyatira is rooted in Jesus' identity as the king.

And so that's why this afternoon we want to think about the king and the kingdom, considering what does it mean to be a church that truly recognizes the crown of Christ?

What challenges are there in being citizens of the kingdom? And of what value is it to be a subject of Christ's kingdom instead of pursuing freedom from his rule?

So those are some of the questions that we want to mull over as we work through Jesus' letter to his people in Thyatira. We've got three points we're going to work through. Firstly, following the king's commands, rejecting the king's enemies, and lastly, sharing the king's victory.

[2 : 25] So the first thing to reflect on is the way in which the church in Thyatira followed the king's commands. But even before we get there, we're given, first of all, a picture of the power of the king.

Jesus says, these are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. The church is reminded from the very off that Jesus is the very Son of God.

And the whole Bible story is rooted in that fact. Even as Jesus took his last breath, the centurion overseeing his crucifixion realized and said, surely this man was the Son of God.

But the Son of God, who came to earth in humility and poverty, who died a criminal's death, well, he looks a little different here in these chapters of Revelation.

Because we're in this realm of apocalyptic imagery. And Jesus here is presented as having eyes of blazing fire and feet of burnished bronze.

[3 : 34] And Jesus doesn't literally have eyes of fire and feet of metal. But the image is conveying something very true about him. It's telling us that Jesus is the one who sees all things.

For he is king over all the world and ruler over all the kings of the earth. And from his eyes come the fire of his judgment and justice.

He doesn't just look upon creation and the people he's made, but he actually responds to them. And we know from the wider picture of what we get in the Bible, and especially in Revelation, he will not leave evil and injustice unpunished.

Indeed, this idea is developed later on in the book. We get to chapter 19 and we see another picture of Jesus as the all-powerful king. John says in chapter 19, So this is Jesus again.

With justice, he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire. And on his head are many crowns. And so John later on is tying this idea of the eyes of fire to Jesus as the just judge.

[4 : 49] He is the all-powerful and perfect judge. And his feet of bronze convey something of his strength and his stability. Just as a king should be powerful and just, well, so he should also be strong and robust.

An unstable monarch or a weak government plunges a country into chaos. But one who holds their course and their aim, who never deviates or changes, and who's always wise in their decisions, well, that's the kind of leader or king that we want.

And that's Jesus. Why is Jesus introducing this letter by describing himself in these terms? Well, I think it's clear that the church in Thyatira need to be reminded that Jesus is their king.

And that with his crown comes his power, his authority, his judgment, and his stability. I think sometimes because Jesus isn't present with us in the flesh, though of course he is present with us through his Holy Spirit.

But though we don't physically see Jesus, it sometimes day to day can be quite easy to forget that Jesus is in fact king. In practice, at least.

[6 : 04] And perhaps we too, like the church in Thyatira, might need to be reminded in our own hearts that Jesus is the all-powerful king and the one who reigns.

But what does it look like to live under the rule of Christ? How does the reign of Christ shape who we are and what we do? Well, here the church in Thyatira is quite a good example to us.

Knowing Jesus as our king means firstly, following the king's commands. This is what Jesus commends the Thyatiran church for. I know your deeds, he says, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Now, the gospel is not about what we do. The Bible emphasizes time and again that salvation comes from faith in Christ and all that he has done, not by the things that we have done.

But nevertheless, once someone has believed in Jesus and recognizes that Jesus died in their place to take away the punishment that we've deserved for our sins, well, there's a new way of life that then emerged.

[7 : 17] They served others because they knew they were part of the kingdom and they persevered in doing good even when it was hard and countercultural. Because, of course, some good works will win the praise of the world, but some will also bring its condemnation.

But the sense we get here from what Jesus writes to the Thyatirans is that they were persevering in all weathers. There's a real sense that they were growing in their goodness.

They weren't stagnating, but they were wanting to grow and develop. Jesus sees that they're doing much more than they were doing at first. When they first believed, they were developing in their desire to serve their king.

They understood that Christ had saved them from sin, that they'd been saved to do good works as a new creation in Christ.

They knew they'd been saved and therefore called to a new way of life. But following the commands of Jesus does often mean going against the grain of our culture, and we all know this.

[8 : 23] I think the model for our culture is probably quite aptly summarized at the beginning of the song Loaded by Primal Scream. It's a great song. Well, the message isn't, but the rest of it is.

But the song samples some dialogue from the beginning of an old film. And it goes a bit like this. I think this really captures the modern philosophy. Starts with the question.

Just what is it that you want to do? And the answer, well, we want to be free. We want to be free to do what we want to do. We want to get loaded. We want to have a good time.

And that's what we're going to do. So just what is it that you want to do? The modern mantra is, of course, you do you. So I think we probably often subconsciously live out the loaded philosophy.

And yet, when we take a step back, we all recognize, at least in part, that total freedom, total freedom to do what we want to do, is actually rather dangerous.

[9 : 26] If everyone did what they wanted to do, well, of course, there'd be chaos. So who sets the rules? Who puts up the guardrails and decides where the barriers are?

Well, this is where the Bible is really helpful, because the Bible teaches us that true freedom is in submitting to the true king. It means true freedom involves a degree of self-sacrifice and self-denial, a recognition that what is good actually isn't, actually can't be defined by me, but has to be defined by someone else, someone outside of myself.

By God, by the king. And what we find as Christians is that by sacrificing what we want to do, we often find we become more truly human and more truly free by doing what Christ wants us to do.

His law and the good works that he calls us to actually bring true freedom and deep joy. In Christ, God offers us a better way than any other way that we might come up with or our culture might come up with or any philosophy might come up with.

True freedom actually embraces the restriction set by a king who knows us better than we know ourselves. And so if God is God, and he is, and if Christ is his perfect king, and he is, well, it stands to reason that he knows the best way to live.

[11 : 04] And so that's why he calls us to follow the king's commands. But not only do kings issue commands, kings also have enemies.

And this brings us on to our second point, which is that the church is called to reject the king's enemies. Now, the gospel is, in a sense, very wide. It's wide in the sense that everyone is invited to believe.

There are no restrictions on who gets an invitation. If you've heard about Jesus, he's calling you, as he calls everyone, to follow him and recognize his kingship and receive his salvation.

But the gospel is also, in a sense, quite narrow. It's narrow in the sense that there is only one way to God, the faith in Jesus Christ, his son.

The Bible is narrow in that it makes exclusive claims. Because there are not many truths, as some might suggest, but there is one truth. Truth is singular.

[12 : 07] And Jesus claims to be the way, the truth, and the life. And so either the Bible represents that which is true, and a message of good news from God to humanity, or it's a fabrication, and a lie which we ought to reject out of hand.

Really, there can be no middle ground. And the truth is important. We all appreciate that. No one likes being lied to.

Those who distort the truth generally tend not to be deemed as particularly good people. I'll go for the easy illustration. In politics, Boris Johnson has resigned for exactly this reason.

It was deemed by the Privileges Committee that he misled Parliament and distorted the facts. The truth was twisted. And we recognize collectively that truth ought to be defended.

And lies ought to be called out for what they are. And so, coming then into the church, when lies and distortions enter the church and enter the message of the gospel, Jesus is understandably angry.

[13 : 18] Last time we were in this series, we were looking at the church in Pergamum. Jesus had called out those in that church who held to a form of false teaching, a teaching which twisted what the Bible really says.

That false teaching there had centered on mixing Christianity with idol worship and with embracing various sexual freedoms of their culture. The church in Thyatira is pretty much facing the same problem.

That is, a false teaching which suggests the gospel of Jesus is compatible with continuing a life of idol worship and sexual license.

As we saw in Pergamum, this goes against what the Bible says. The Bible is clear that there is one God and only he is to be worshipped.

So, that means the idols are out. And the Bible teaches a sexual ethic that limits sex to the confines of marriage between one man and one woman.

[14 : 19] And we looked at all this when we considered the letter to Pergamum, so we're not going to repeat the same things which we said there. But here, Jesus takes issue with two particular things in addition to this false teaching.

Firstly, he takes issue with the way in which the Thyatira and church are tolerating this false teaching. Secondly, he takes issue with the false teacher herself, a woman he calls Jezebel.

So, he says this, I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching, she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

I doubt that this individual was actually called Jezebel. Rather, it seems that Jesus was likening this woman who was calling herself a prophet to the evil queen of Israel called Jezebel.

That queen was responsible for killing hundreds of God's prophets, for inciting her husband Ahab into the most terrible sins, and for leading all Israel into worship of Baal and Asherah, who were ancient Canaanite deities, and crucially, were not the true God.

[15 : 38] And so, the name Jezebel, here and probably still today, tends to have bad connotations for that reason. That Jesus is comparing this false prophet to one of the worst figures in the Old Testament, reveals just how dangerous Jesus sees false teaching.

It's dangerous because if the gospel is true and brings salvation, well, then false teaching is the opposite. It twists it and leads away from salvation.

It's like if someone asks you the way to Edinburgh, well, you don't send them towards Greenock for many reasons, but the road might look similar. In fact, it is the same road, but you can't get around the fact that one way leads to Greenock, the other way leads to Edinburgh.

You cannot get to both places the same way. Jesus, he came to offer hope and salvation. When his message is twisted and people are sent on the wrong road by those who twist it, is it any wonder that he is angry?

Most often, false teaching involves a new understanding of the message that's been handed down. Jezebel's message here is described as Satan's so-called deep secrets.

[16 : 58] Presumably, Jezebel was suggesting that she had a deeper understanding of the gospel that had been revealed to her by prophecy. But Jesus says that these deep secrets come not from him, but from Satan.

As we're saying, if someone is teaching something original and new, well, be very, very careful and very doubtful. Because after 2,000 years of Christianity, it's unlikely that new interpretations represent what Scripture is actually saying.

And so we have to weigh them very, very carefully and wisely, especially if it seems like they are rooted in or occasioned by cultural developments rather than a close reading of God's word.

And what we see here as Jesus speaks about Jezebel and pronounces judgment on her is that his words might seem surprisingly harsh.

Yet this is what he says. I've given her time to repent of her immorality, but she's unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely unless they repent of her ways.

[18 : 08] I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

It's because twisting of the gospel leads people ultimately to hell that Jesus has decided the time is up for Jezebel, whoever she was.

She has been given time to stop, to repent, to say sorry, but she's kept going. Her and her followers will know Jesus' anger because Jesus is the great shepherd and as the shepherd, he leads his sheep to water, but not only that, he has to be the shepherd who drives off the wolf from the sheep.

Jezebel is a wolf that the shepherd has to drive away. Jesus is the king who will not suffer his enemies to lead his people astray.

Now, the culture we live in, Western culture, generally tends to prize the virtue of toleration. Sometimes this is genuinely a very, very good thing. But sometimes, however, there are times when we must be intolerant.

[19 : 23] And we all know this. To illustrate, in the right circumstances, there's virtue in toleration. For example, Britain refused to tolerate the expansion of Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

It's a good example of good intolerance. To go back to our former illustration, Parliament has refused to tolerate the lies of a former prime minister. And parents don't or shouldn't tolerate disobedience from their children.

Intolerance is sometimes a virtue. We don't tolerate evil. We don't tolerate lies. And we don't tolerate disobedience. Nor should we. Jesus is angry at Thyatira because they've tolerated the wrong kind of thing.

They've tolerated the teaching of Jezebel. And as for them, well, so it must be for us. The church and God's people must always be kind, considerate, and compassionate to those who hold to different views, different outlooks, different worldviews.

That's really important. Perhaps you see yourself in that category and everyone is welcome within the church who holds to different views. But nevertheless, when it comes to teaching and the different views that are proliferated and promoted or allowed to be promoted within the context of the church, the church must never, ever waver on what is true.

[20 : 46] It must never tolerate that which twists the gospel out of shape. Tolerating a false gospel is tantamount, effectively, to endorsing it because it gives a false message, a dangerous false message, credibility, and gives it room to feed on the unsuspecting sheep like a virus.

And churches that do tolerate a false gospel often end up being taken over by it. Once the wolves are in the walls, the church is in great danger.

And so, just as King Jesus will not let Jezebel set herself up as queen, we too must be careful to discern what is true. And those with responsibility for the church, pastors, elders, deacons, they have a particular responsibility to ensuring the church's safety and the defense of the one true gospel handed down by Jesus and his apostles in his word.

And Jesus then adds, Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, I will not impose any other burden on you except to hold on to what you have until I come.

What does Jesus call Christians to do? Well, he calls them to hold on. Hold on to what they have until he comes back, which he will one day do.

[22 : 17] What do they and what do we have? Well, we have the gospel and we have Jesus Christ himself. These are precious things not to be traded in for a new message, no matter how wise, spiritual, or culturally relevant it might sound.

Jesus wants us to hold on to him. If we do hold on to Jesus, if we believe in him, follow his commands, reject twisted gospels, and sign up to his kingdom and his reign, well then we will have a share in the king's victory.

This brings us on to our final point. Jesus says, to the one who's victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. That one will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery, just as I have received authority from my father.

If you remember at the start of our time, I mentioned that in Revelation chapter 1, Jesus is described as the ruler of the kings of the earth. Well here, when Jesus is encouraging the church in Thyatira to keep following him, to keep going, well he promises them a share in that rule and reign.

So Jesus quotes from Psalm 2, Psalm which we sang earlier, and we said earlier that it's a Psalm which is primarily speaking about Jesus. It anticipates the way in which God makes all the nations of the world the inheritance of his son, the king.

[23 : 56] And he says to his anointed king, you will break them with a rod of iron, you will dash them to pieces like pottery. So what's really remarkable here is that Jesus is telling the Thyatirans that this royal authority that belongs to him, well they're going to have a share in it, it will be theirs as well.

When we choose to follow Jesus, we're adopted into a royal family. It's as if, as in the princess diaries, we discover that we are heir to a kingdom that we never knew about.

In Christ, we become heirs to the kingdom of heaven. And we will be more than just subjects when the kingdom finally comes in all its glory and majesty.

we will reign with Jesus and under Jesus. It's a remarkable promise. And it's conveyed through this image of the morning star.

Because Jesus says he will give to the one who does his will to the end the morning star. Later in Revelation, Jesus is going to say this, I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches.

[25 : 07] I am the root and offspring of David and the bright morning star. The morning star is an epithet and title that belongs to Jesus.

It's a sign of his kingdom and his right to rule as the descendant of King David, that great ancient king of Israel. But what Jesus is saying to us is, I will give you the morning star.

I will give you honour and glory that belongs to me. It would be like if King Charles on his procession out of Westminster Abbey on his coronation day gave the orb and the scepter the symbols of his royal power to you or to me or to someone standing in the crowd.

It would be completely unprecedented, completely out of the blue. That's what it means for Jesus to promise us the morning star.

He is the king but he invites everyone who believes in him to have a share in his rule and his reign. Perhaps it sounds too good to be true but that's the gospel.

[26 : 23] Faith in Jesus leads to a glorious end, world without end, a crown upon your head, a scepter in your hand. What that's going to look like I can't say for certain but one thing I do know is it is going to be good.

It's going to be wonderful. So as we close I'd like to finish with just one final illustration. I've mentioned our current king a few times but I want to illustrate using one of his most famous ancestors whether he was real or not.

he was a king who bore the epithet the once and future king. This is of course King Arthur him of the round table and Excalibur. The Arthur legend goes that he reigned over an ideal kingdom a golden age where virtue and goodness prevailed but then he died and the legend says that one day King Arthur will return again thus being the once and future king.

I love the myth it's a great story but what I love even more is the reality that we find in Jesus because in a sense he is the true once and future king.

He came to earth to proclaim his kingdom to win it on the cross and in the resurrection and Jesus was victorious he was proclaimed king by all that he did but he's not with us just now he's ascended he's at the right hand of the father he's waiting to come back.

[27 : 57] He is the future king the whole world is waiting for and when he comes well he really will bring in a real golden age a golden age that's going to stretch on for all eternity.

He is the true once and future king that we're waiting for and so if Jesus is your king if you know he is hold on to what you have hold on to him and if he isn't perhaps today is the day to bow before him to receive your crown and scepter because he's inviting you to join him and to join his people in a better kingdom a better world the once and future king is coming where will we stand when the king returns?

and