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The Church at Thyatira

2: 18-29

The church at Thyatira DIG: What are the strengths of this body of believers? How is it adulterous? What does the symbolic name Jezebel indicate about the woman in this church? How does Yeshua describe Himself? How do you interpret this description? What is He saying about Himself? Why is this appropriate for the body in Thyatira? How is the nature and source of the temptation in Thyatira like, and unlike, that in Pergamum? What do you think Jesus' promises in 2:26-27 mean?

REFLECT: Which of the qualities in 2:19 apply to you this week? Why? Who or what has played a role similar to Jezebel in you life? How? How did Yeshua free you from that influence? What do you appreciate about the promise to overcomers in this section? Why?

Jesus Christ has called **His Church** to be holy and maintain purity by dealing with sin in its midst (**Matthew 18:15-17**). After the birth of **the Church**, initially made up of only Jewish believers on the Feast Shavu'ot, **the Lord** demonstrated **His** commitment to a pure **church** by executing Ananias and Sapphira (**Acts 5:1-11**). Paul was also passionate about the purity of **the church** at Corinth (**1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 11:2**).

Despite the clear biblical teaching to the contrary, **churches** throughout history have **tolerated** sin following a pattern like **the Thyatiran** congregation, whose members were engaging in both spiritual and physical adultery. Through the insidious efforts of a false teacher, those sins had become pervasive in the body **in Thyatira**. This letter was a sobering and marked a new phase in the letters to seven churches. There is a general deterioration in the character, with the exception of **the church** in Philadelphia, as they became more and more worldly. That decline continued to spiral downward to the apostasy at Laodicea.

The phrase, **Satan's so-called deep secrets**, indicates how far the believers **in Thyatira** had fallen in relation to those of Smyrna and Pergamum. The believers at

Smyrna faced persecution from **the synagogue of Satan**, or unbelieving Gentiles (**2:9**). The Pergamum **church** existed **where Satan** had **his throne (2:13)**, the greatest center of pagan and emperor worship in the world at that time. But **the church in Thyatira** had plunged headlong into the very depths of satanic deception.

This is the longest letter of the seven, even though addressed to **the church** in the smallest of the seven cities. It has an important message for us today. False doctrine and sin are not to be allowed into the local body – even under the banner of **love, toleration**, coexistence or unity. There may be much that is commendable in a body of believers. It may appear to have an effective ministry on the surface, and it may be growing numerically. Yet false doctrine and immorality, if not confronted, will bring judgment upon it.⁸²

Over the last several decades, **tolerance** has become one of the greatest “virtues” of our increasingly secular society. This is not the **tolerance** that our grandparents practiced. Their kind of **tolerance** meant that even though you disagreed and disapproved of someone’s beliefs, values and lifestyle, you stuck to your own point of view while accepting the views of others to believe and live as they chose. In other words, you didn’t relive the Dark Ages by grabbing your pitchfork and rioting against people with different opinions. As long as they operated with the law, their opinions were **tolerated**. But today, instead of **tolerating** beliefs or practices with which we strongly disagree, our secular society expects us to agree with everybody’s beliefs, values and lifestyles. Every deviant behavior wants to be affirmed as being “normal.” As a result, the belief in absolute truth becomes weaker and weaker. How can there be absolute truth if everybody’s beliefs are equal?

*Dear Holy Heavenly **Father**, Praise you for your holiness and your love. Praise you that **You** are so pure and powerful that **You** never compromise. Thank **You** for defeating evil and not tolerating any sin. May our love for **You** and our desire to follow **Your** example of No tolerance for evil-be more important to us than our desire to be tolerant of others so they will like us. We fix our eyes on heaven, on pleasing **You** and on our home of eternal peace and great joy in heaven forever. Please give us the strength to fight the battle against the wrong idea that “All things are right if it is right to you.” Remind us that the final battle of the ages is done, over with a victorious battle by the sword coming out of **Your** mouth (**Revelation 19:11-16, 19-21**). The enemy totally defeated, thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur-and you will reign! **Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The One riding on it is called Faithful and True, and He***

judges and makes war in righteousness. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and many royal crowns are on His head. He has a name written that no one knows except Himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is “the Word of God.” I worship **You** and choose to love **You** by not tolerating other’s wrong beliefs. In the holy name of **Your Son** and the power of **His** resurrection. Amen

Today, as long as you are syncretistic, or believe that everything goes, people are **tolerant**; however, as soon as you believe in absolutes, they become extremely intolerant. A culture that **tolerates** evil calls disagreement *phobia*. Taking a stand is considered *hate*. Conviction is seen as *bigoted fanaticism*. Sound biblical doctrine is regarded as *discrimination*. As in many churches that compromise their values today, this was a picture of **the ancient church at Thyatira**. In **His** letter to that **church**, **Messiah** addressed the issue of big sins in a small **church** – and the even bigger issue of **tolerating** them.

1. The description of Christ: The title **Son of God** and the two other phrases are taken from the vision of the risen **Messiah** in **1:12-17**. This title emphasizes **His** deity, stressing the point that **He** was one with **ADONAI (John 5:18)**. The change of wording from **1:13** should not escape us. There, **John** describes **Him** as **someone like a son of man**; here, however, **He** is identified as **the Son of God**. Indeed, this is the only time in the book of **Revelation** that this title is given to **Him** because **He** comes to **the church in Thyatira**, not as a sympathetic **High Priest**, but as **Judge**. Nothing can be hidden from **Him** because **His eyes are like blazing fire (Dani’el 10:6)**. As **Hebrews 4:13** says: **Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give an account. His feet are like burnished bronze** because **He** comes to this **church** in judgment (**1:14-15** and here in **2:18**). Everything in the courtyard of the Tabernacle was made of **bronze** because it pointed to judgment (see the commentary on **Exodus, to see link click Fa - Build an Altar of Acacia Wood Overlaid with Bronze**). This frightening description of **Messiah** should have been terrifying to them, but few repented.

2. The church: As is the case with the churches at Smyrna and Pergamum, the Bible does not record the founding of **the church in Thyatira**. The book of **Acts** tells us that **a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira**, was converted **and baptized**, along with **the members of her household**, under Rabbi Sha’ul’s ministry at Philippi (**Acts 16:14-15**). So it seems that **Lydia** and **her household** participated in starting **the church in Thyaria**,

probably as an outreach of the apostle Paul's ministry at Ephesus (**Acts 19:10**). It was evidently **the** smallest **church** from the smallest city of the seven. But big problems can occur in small places.



3. The city: From Pergamum, the northernmost of the seven cities, the Roman road curved east and then southeast to **Thyatira**, about forty miles away. The name of the city means *continual sacrifice*. The longest of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important and least remarkable of the cities. All the other cities were visually remarkable. **Thyatira**, however, was built on flat land and lacked an acropolis. Its lack of natural fortifications played a major role in its history.

Thyatira was founded by one of Alexander the Great's successors, Seleucus, as a military outpost guarding the north-south road. Because **Thyatira** had no natural defenses, the city was continually destroyed and rebuilt. It was the gateway to Pergamum, and would only be useful militarily to buy time for that city to ready for attack. Finally, around 190 BC, **Thyatira** was conquered by the Romans and thus enjoyed peace under Roman rule. At that time it became a thriving commercial center. Its location on the main north-south road, formally a liability, and then became an asset. It connected Pergamum with Laodicea, Smyrna and the inner regions of Asia. At the time that **John** wrote **Revelation**, it was just entering its greatest period of prosperity.

Unlike Pergamum or Smyrna, it was not an important religious center. It did possess a few temples, but it had no strong devotion to the worship of the emperor. The primary god worshiped there was the Greek sun god, Apollo. There were a few Torah observant Jews **in Thyatira**, but not enough to cause trouble for **the church** there. The problem there was not external persecution, but internal compromise.

Thyatira gained a reputation as a blue-collar town, where the trade guilds stood at the center of the social and religious life. To hold a job or run a business, it was necessary to be a member of a guild. These guilds enjoyed feasts that were dedicated to their patron deities, in whose honor they were held – complete with meat sacrificed to idols. Some believers would argue that the alleged gods were not real so participation in the meals did not compromise their witness for **the Lord**. The real problem was the fact that the feasts usually ended in an orgy. This was the same problem that the other churches in Asia faced. Ephesus had opposed all such compromise with pagan practices; in Pergamum, a small number of believers fully gave themselves over to pagan social life. The problem **in Thyatira**, as we shall see, assumed a new and dangerous form.⁸³

4. The commendation: I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first (2:19). In some ways **Thyatira** was strong where Ephesus was weak. Unlike Ephesus, which had lost its first love and stopped doing the things they had done at earlier, the latter works of **Thyatira** were more impressive than in its beginnings. In fact it was **the first church** of the seven to be commended for its **love**. **They** believed the right message; **they** had the right motivation. But all **their** fine attributes, as crucial as they were, could not substitute for godly living, and **their** pagan life style was dragging **them** down.

5. The concern: So outwardly **they** seemed to be doing well. Its members demonstrated **love, faith, service and perseverance**. **They** were committed – in fact increasing – in **their** work for **God** and **His** Kingdom. So what did **Yeshua have against them**? The problem was two fold. First, **they** violated the biblical teaching that a **woman** is not to be the authoritative teacher of **her** local **church** (see my commentary on **Genesis Lv - I Do Not Permit a Woman to Teach or Have Authority Over a Man, She Must Be Silent**). But a **woman who** called **herself a prophetess** was courting **them**. False teaching can come from gifted people and **Jezebel** was clearly gifted. **She** claimed to have special revelations from **the Lord**, which qualified **her** to be the authoritative teacher in the body of believers **at Thyatira**. A little compromise here, a little compromise there, and before long **she** had won **their** hearts. **She** was obviously subversive to **the church** leadership and won over followers among **the Thyatiran believers** . . . all to **their** detriment.

Secondly, **they** compounded **their** error by tolerating **her teaching** and being led into idolatry. Undoubtedly, **Jezebel** was not the false prophetess's real name, but like the infamous wife of King Ahab, **she** was **Satan's** agent to corrupt **God's**

people and was dangerously close to eliminating true worship of **ADONAI**. **She** was deceptive, idolatrous, domineering, scheming and vicious. Thus, **Yeshua** branded **her** with the symbolic name of **Jezebel**.⁸⁴ Here is the opposite situation from that in Ephesus. The Ephesians had tested those who called themselves apostles and had rejected them, but in doing so they had become harsh and critical. In **Thyatira**, however, a **church** that was abounding and increasing in **love and faith tolerated a false prophetess to their** own spiritual undoing.⁸⁵

When a **woman** is used symbolically in Scripture, she represents a religious entity either positively or negatively. On the positive side, there is **Yisra'el** as **the Wife of ADONAI** and **the Church** as **the Bride of Christ**; on the negative side, there is **the Great Prostitute of Chapter 17**, and here, **the woman Jezebel**. This name would remind these **believers** of the pagan wife of king Ahab in the TaNaKh, who introduced pagan worship into Isra'el that surpassed all the previous sins of idolatry in the northern Kingdom.

Idolatry in the northern Kingdom of Isra'el began with the first king, Jeroboam. But there was a difference between the sin of Jeroboam and the sin of Ba'al worship introduced by **Jezebel**. The sin of Jeroboam was a corruption of the true religion. Jeroboam set up a golden calf in the cities of Dan and Bethel, but they represented the **God** that brought them out of the land of Egypt. This was idolatry, but it was a corruption of the true worship of **the Lord (First Kings 12:25-33)**. With **Jezebel**, however, a whole new god and system of worship were introduced in Isra'el (**First Kings 16:29-33**). Through **Jezebel**, Ba'al worship came into the northern Kingdom, resulting in more idolatry than ever before. The worship of Ba'al involved **sexuality immorality**. In the corruption of the true religion, morality was still present; however, in the worship of Ba'al there was total **immorality**.

Therefore, **Jezebel** became a very real picture of what the Roman church evolved into during the period of the Dark Ages. It introduced a paganism that resulted in idolatry and spiritual adultery. It became a new religious system bearing little resemblance to the New Covenant body of believers.⁸⁶ So like the **Jezebel** of old, this **woman** misled the body **at Thyatira by her teaching, and** led them **into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols (2:20)**. The error of the **prophetess Jezebel** was the same as that of the Nicolaitans in Pergamum, full acceptance of the world's value system. The reason the problem was so much worse **in Thyatira** was that membership in the trade guilds involved participation in the feasts that led **them into sexual immorality**.

Obviously, despite the virtues of some the people of **Thyatira**, most of the people in **the church** there were getting sidetracked and going along with teachings that were contrary to the gospel. It was not enough for **them** to rest on **their** accomplishments. **Yeshua** was challenging the sin in **their** midst.

It is not hard to understand the dilemma. At times, we can be so concerned with our personal lives, trying to grow in holiness or working for **the Lord**, that we overlook what would otherwise be obvious sin. We may be trying to advance in one area of our faith, while at the same time we ignore problems in another area.

When you see a family member getting involved in something that is harmful, do you turn away, or do you storm heaven in intercession, or for opportunities to win that person to Christ? Do you allow gossip or cheating to take place at work, as long as you don't participate in it? Or do you try to say something or look for peaceful ways to offer alternatives? In your own life, do you focus on having a good prayer time, and yet **tolerate** "little white lies?" Let's not put blinders on when it comes to living out our faith. Let's **hold on** to what **Yeshua** has done, and *not tolerate* anything or anyone that distorts the gospel.⁸⁷

Graciously, **Jesus** gave the false **prophetess time to repent of her immorality, but she** was **unwilling (2:21)** because **she** loved the darkness rather than the light (**John 3:19**). But **she** refused to repent, and therefore **the Lord** declared that **He** would **cast her on a bed of** sickness, **and** would also **make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they** repented **of her ways (2:22)**. The Greek text simply reads **bed**, but translators have correctly rendered the idea of the TaNaKh that means *to fall sick (Exodus 21:18)*. Probably a contrast between **a bed of** sickness and **a bed of** adultery is intended. **Messiah** promised to punish **Jezebel** with some sort of sickness.⁸⁸ In addition, any of **the believers** in the body who did not **repent** of **their** sin of physical and spiritual **adultery** would also **suffer** with **her**.

Then **the Lord** named a third group that would face judgment, declaring: **I will strike her children dead**. Here **John** distinguishes between those who joined in the **adultery with her** and those who are called **her children**. Death was the judgment for the latter, while sickness was the punishment for the former. Evidently **the Holy Spirit intends** to differentiate between those who were still struggling with the problem of how to be loyal to **Messiah** and at the same time keep their jobs, and those who had given themselves over wholeheartedly to the teaching of **the false prophetess**.⁸⁹ The result of this would be that **all the** other six **churches**

would **know that Yeshua** was **the One** who searched **their hearts and minds, and He** would **repay each of them according to their deeds (2:23)**. As the Psalmist said: **O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure (Psalm 7:9)**.

In the larger context, **verses 22–23** contain some of the harshest words of judgment in these seven letters. They describe the judgment of those with the spirit of **Jezebel**, who think like **Jezebel**, or those who believe what the original **Jezebel** believed. Therefore, they will go through the Great Tribulation, but the faithful believers, like those in the church of Philadelphia will not.

6. The command: Having warned the followers of the false **prophets** to **repent, Christ** gave words of comfort to **the rest of** the true believers **in Thyatira who did not hold to her teaching**, even though they tolerated **her**. Even though in the minority, the true believers were those who had **not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets**. Various Gnostic philosophies appealed to people's pride by promising spiritual knowledge deeper than available to ordinary mortals. Many modern cults make the same empty promises. **Jezebel** and **her** followers had claimed to understand the very depths of **Satan's** realm and yet remain spiritually untouched. In other words, they believed they could swim in a spiritual toilet and come up smelling like a rose. In that pre-Gnostic teaching, they taught they were free to participate in sins of the body without it affecting their spiritual life. In their twisted thinking, because the spirit belongs to **ADONAI** it didn't matter if they attended idolatrous feasts or engaged in orgies. They wanted to live like the devil and then brazenly come to worship **God (2:24)**. **Her** false teaching is alive and well today under a variety of names; and just when faithful believers put these modern heresies in the grave, they seem to jump right back out again! That's because it's so enticing to justify immorality in the name of grace.

*We need to take a stand against false doctrine in **the Church**. We are in no position to condemn others (**Like 6:37; Romans 2:1**); however, Paul instructed the **Corinthians** to judge those within the local church by rebuking sin and correcting false teaching. This often meant removing the wicked person from the church through proper church discipline (**1 Cor 5:9-13**). The purpose is not merely to purify the local church, but also the restoration of the open, habitual sinning believer. In other words, the biblical approach to **toleration** is, "Don't judge the world (**First John 2:15-17**) for **God** will judge them. Instead, hold your local church or messianic synagogue to its own standards of doctrinal and moral purity."*

To the true **believers**, **Jesus** said: **I will not impose any other burden on you**. However, to prevent overconfidence, **Christ** commanded: **Only hold on to what you have until I come (2:25)**. The English phrase **hold fast**, comes from the Greek word *krateo*, which points to the fact that their holding **on** would not be an easy thing to do. Bearing the **burden** of false **teaching** and immoral living in **their** own **church**, **they** were also under constant spiritual attack and ridicule from **Jezebel** and **her** followers. Continuing in **their** faithfulness would be task enough. This is true for us also today. We need to **hate what is evil** and **cling to what is good** until **Messiah** returns (**Romans 12:9**).

7. The counsel: The promise is two-fold. First, the victorious believer **who overcomes Satan's** counterfeit system **and does Christ's will to the end** will have a part in the Messianic Kingdom, where **Jesus will give him authority over the nations**. Those who remain faithful to **Messiah** in this life will **rule** with **Him** in **His** earthly Messianic Kingdom. As the psalmist said: **He will rule them with an iron scepter; He will dash them into pieces like pottery (Psalm 2:7-9; Isaiah 30:14)**. Those who rebel against **Christ's rule** during the Millennium will be destroyed (**20:7-15**). **The believers** who **rule** with **Him** will receive **His** authority, **just as He received authority from His Father (2:26-27)**. Secondly, **they** will also have **the Morning Star** or **Jesus Himself (2:28)**. In **22:16**, **the Lord** said: **I, Jesus, have sent My angel to give you this testimony for the church. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright and Morning Star** (also see **Numbers 24:17; Second Peter 1:19**). The possession of the true faith presumes the possession of the true **God**.

Finally, **Jesus** says: **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the messianic communities (2:29)**. This is a warning to **the church at Thyatira** to listen to what **He** has said. The letter reveals the seriousness of practicing, or tolerating, sin. But those who are faithful, even though there are struggles in this life, they will experience the fullness of **the Lord** as they reign with **Him** in **His** thousand-year Millennial Kingdom.

***Jesus**, gaze on me with your **eyes like blazing fire**. Pierce through my individualism and through any hollow reliance I have on my own abilities or actions. Help me not to **tolerate** sin, but **hold on to** what you have given me.⁹⁰ In the name **of the Son of God, whose feet are like burnished bronze**, amen.*

The compromising body of believers at Thyatira picture the Church during the Dark Ages from AD 607 to 1517. It was called the Dark Ages because

spiritual darkness grew as a result of the marriage of the Church to the world. The light, which **Jesus Christ** entrusted to **His Church** all but flickered out during that dark time.

Thyatira means *continual sacrifice*, which is the central heresy of the Roman Catholic church. That is, the church of Rome denies the finished work of **Messiah** on the cross. **Jesus** said: **It is finished (John 19:30)**, but the Roman church believes in a *continual sacrifice* that produces such things as sacraments and praying for the dead, burning candles and so on. The following changes and doctrines that have their source in paganism were added to the church during the Dark Ages:

AD 607 Boniface III made the first universally recognized pope

AD 709 Kissing the Pope's feet started

AD 786 Worshiping of images and relics

AD 850 The use of "holy water"

AD 995 Canonization of dead saints

AD 998 Fasting on Fridays during Lent

AD 1079 Celibacy of the priesthood

AD 1090 Prayer beads introduced

AD 1184 The Inquisition

AD 1190 Sale of Indulgences started

AD 1215 The doctrine of transubstantiation started

AD 1220 Worship of the wafer or host

AD 1229 The Bible was forbidden to the common people

AD 1414 The communion cup was forbidden to the common people

AD 1439 The doctrine of purgatory was decreed

AD 1439 The doctrine of the seven sacraments was affirmed

AD 1508 The Ave Maria was approved

AD 1534 The Jesuit order was founded

AD 1545 Tradition was granted equal authority with the Bible

AD 1546 The Apocryphal books were put into the Roman Bible

All heresy falls into one of two basic categories: a false concept of the deity of **Christ** or mixing works with faith. The church of Rome can hardly be accused of teaching a false concept of the deity of **Messiah**; however, their emphasis on the *continual sacrifice* and rejection of **Messiah's** finished work breeds a concept that caused mankind to try to earn his or her own salvation by works, penance, indulgences and many other satanically conceived ideas labeled by **the Lord** as **Satan's so-called deep secrets**.⁹¹ Once **the church at Thyatira** started to compromise and fall in love with the world, it started a downward slide to spiritual death. About thirty miles southeast of **Thyatira**, the believers at Sardis had compromised to the point that they were on spiritual life support.