

LET THE BIBLE SPEAK, SERIES

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Letter To The Church at Thyatira

Thyatira was a wealthy city, located in the northern part of Lydia, near the border of Mysia, on the Lycas River, some forty miles southeast of Pergamum. The city had been governed by Rome since 190 B.C., being a part of the province of Asia. The city lay in a valley surrounded by gently sloping hills. Even though there was no temple to the emperor, there were at least three temples dedicated to various other gods or goddesses. The city was noted for its trade and manufacturing capabilities, especially its purple dye and dyed garments. It was also noted for its trade-guilds, which may have formed some of the basis of the problems found in the church. The guilds were made up of workers from various sectors such as linen, wool, tanners, leather, dyers, bakers, slave dealers, and bronze smiths.

This is the longest of the letters to the seven churches, no doubt because of the seriousness of the problems existing here. We know nothing of the origin of this church its only mention in scripture being here. We are first introduced to this city and one of its residents in Acts 16:11-15 when Paul converted Lydia, a seller of purple. She was baptized in a river just outside the city of Philippi. Some believe that upon her return home, she became the driving force behind the beginning of the church in that city. This may well be, but there is no evidence to back up such an assertion.

It is the "Son of God" who speaks. His eyes penetrate the corruption existing in the church and his feet are ready to trample and burn to ashes all who yield to the seductive teachings of the wicked Jezebel.

I know thy works, and thy love and faith and ministry and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first.

As has been affirmed in the other letters, nothing is hidden from him who walks among the lamp stands. All is open before his eyes. Works, both good and bad do not escape his notice. Reading such a commendation, one might well ask "what could be wrong with a church like that?" However even though there was love, patience, service, and faith in the church there was also a disease at work that threatened the very life of the congregation. It was that disease that became the burden of the Lord's message.

But I have this against thee, that thou sufferest the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess; and she teacheth and seduceth my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.

Was this Jezebel an individual in the church at Thyatira or a symbolical designation given to a segment of the church guilty of the things mentioned? The evidence would seem to point to a specific woman in the church, one with great leadership ability, who had been successful in leading a significant group of Christians astray. Her prototype was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, who led her husband Ahab to serve Baal (1Kings 16:31). It was this wicked woman who cut off the prophets of Jehovah, and

encouraged idolatry. Her sins are described as "the whoredoms and witchcraft" of Jezebel (2Kings 9:22). This was not the actual name of the woman in Thyatira, however because of the similarity in the sins of the two women, she is so designated.

It seems only logical that Jezebel's teaching would be readily received in this city consisting of many guilds, each of which had its own social festival, embracing of various pagan religious elements. This presented a special problem for some Christians. In order to keep his employment or advance his business, it would seem advantageous to maintain membership in the guild of his particular profession. Could this be done and still maintain loyalty to Christ? It is probable that Jezebel taught a compromising position here, leading people to believe that one could maintain membership, without becoming involved in the religious and social activities of the guild. Many, however, found this neither practical nor easy. Faced with this dilemma, they compromised their faith, giving in to temptation, and sinned against the Lord.

Today many are faced with the similar problems in labor unions. The Christian has to decide if the association in that union calls upon him to participate in conduct contrary to the teaching and faith of our Lord. If no principle is violated, there is no wrong. If a principle is violated, there can be no compromising that principle. "Be ye not unequally..." 2Cor.6:14.

The fornication may have been physical since such often accompanied pagan festivals. However, it would seem probable that "fornication" here should be understood as spiritual fornication or idolatry. Whether physical or spiritual it is the consequence of Jezebel's teaching and influence upon the church.

The tragedy of this situation is that the church "suffered" or allowed it to continue unchallenged and unabated. The lesson is clear. It is not enough to just refrain from such activities. We must oppose them. Teach against them and condemn their existence.

And I gave her time that she should repent; and she willeth not to repent of her fornication.

God is kind and longsuffering. He wants all to come to repentance. It appears here, however, that God's patience had run out. The obstinate resistance of this woman was as flagrant as her sin. Often people mistake time given them to repent as a sign that all is well. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." (Eccl.8:11) So it was with Jezebel. She did not want to change. She willeth not to repent.

Behold, I cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works.

A failure to repent leads to judgment. This woman would be cast into a bed of pain and affliction. Those who had shared in her wicked teachings and practices would suffer the

same fate reserved for her. The idea is that the bed into which they are cast is a bed of great tribulation. There is still hope, still time to repent. "Repent of her works" refer to the works that originated in this woman's evil teaching. Unless the church repented of sharing in that teaching or failing to oppose it, they would share in the inevitable judgment facing her.

And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto each one of you according to your works.

Her children refer to those who listened to her and were influenced by her teaching. They practiced what she taught. Hence, they would perish just as she would. Those who had been influenced but had not fully yielded to her teachings should repent. Three groups are considered: 1. Jezebel the source of the teaching, 2. those who are completely under her teaching, i.e. her children, and 3. those who have been influenced but have not completely succumbed, who can yet be redeemed. The latter were to be cast into a bed of tribulation, but not killed with death.

The important lesson for all is that God does not condone sin, neither can we. He does not tolerate it, and those who do will suffer grave consequences because of their spineless disposition.

"Reins" literally means kidneys, but figuratively refers to "the seat of the deepest emotions and affections of man, which God alone can fully know" (ISBE). The idea is that God searches and knows the whole inner man. Nothing is hidden from him.

Notice how the message becomes personal..."I will give unto each one of you." Each of us stands alone before God. We are responsible for our inner person as well as our outward behavior. God knows all and will deal with us individually. Every person in Thyatira had to account for himself as to his relationship to this terrible woman and her ungodly teaching.

But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, who know not the deep things of Satan, as they are wont to say, I cast upon you none other burden.

The false teachers in this church were in pursuit of the "deep things of Satan". The Lord here identifies the source of this teaching. It came from Satan. Some think that these teachers may have been a sect of the Gnostics. Some such sects taught that in order for one to understand Satanic doctrine and life the individual should experience first hand those things practiced by the cult. The idea being that such an experience would not affect the spirit but only the flesh. Peter warned against such teachers "For, uttering great swelling words of vanity, they entice in the lusts of the flesh, by lasciviousness, those who are just escaping from them that live in error" (2Peter 2:18). The fallacy of such teaching is seen in the fact that one does not have to murder in order to understand it. Neither does one have to commit fornication in order to know what it is.

The phrase "I cast no other burden" refers to their obligation to keep the faith and maintain moral character. The Lord required of them only that which was necessary nothing more or less.

Nevertheless that which ye have, hold fast till I come.

The Christians are encouraged to hold on to the moral life required of them as the children of God. "Till I come" does not refer to the "second coming" but rather a coming to aid or judge the church.

And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give authority over the nations.

The addressed are those who overcome the Jezebel threat and keep the faith by doing the commandments of God. "Unto the end" just means that there is no place to slow down or quit in serving the Lord. One can never give up. That is not an option and should not be in our vocabulary.

To him will I give authority and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father.

The idea is that God raised Christ to sit on the throne. To the Son was given the nations over which He should rule with a rod of iron (Psalms 2:7-9). Here, those who overcome, and keep his works, are said to share that rule with Him. The rule is spiritual through the gospel or revealed truth.

And I will give him the morning star.

Hailey says "The meaning seems to be that as the morning star, one of the brightest in the heavens, heralds the approach of dawn and a new day, so Christ here promises that he will give to the conqueror a new day; the night is almost over." These Christians should take heart. Victory is ahead for the faithful.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

Hearing necessitates an ear for spiritual truths. Some have it, others have grown "dull of hearing". Hearing is personal and individual, involving a willingness to accept and comply with what is said.