

The revelation of Jesus Christ

Lesson # 9 The Church at Thyatira Revelation 2: 18-29

Date: Sunday, November 8, 2009

*18"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*

*19 "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. 20But 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. 21I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 22Behold, 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, 23and 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. 24But 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. 25Only hold fast what you have until I come. 26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 27and 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. 28And I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'*

①

## Thyatira

This church – the fourth one - is in the smallest city of the 7, but receives the longest message of the 7.<sup>i</sup> It was 40 miles SE of Pergamum in a long N-S valley, and was a rich agricultural area, but it had little in the way of natural fortifications.

Rome took control of the city in about 190 BC, and roads were built which helped the city to prosper. However, since the first century AD, it has been destroyed and rebuilt many times as a result of Christian / Muslim wars. It was a city easily defeated because of its' geography, but it had a strategic location, which meant that rebuilding was always necessary.

It became a center for wool, linens, pottery and bronze & trade guilds ( like unions ) were established there which became very powerful over individuals' lives. The dying & manufacturing of woolen goods appears to have been a large industry in Thyatira – remember Lydia whom Paul met and led to Christ in Philippi – Acts 16:14. She was a seller of purple ( dyes and dyed goods ) from Thyatira. The population of the city was mostly gentile, and we see no Jewish connotation in the letter. Apollo was the main deity and emperor worship does not seem to have been an issue there. It did have temples to Apollo, Artemis & Tyrimnaios, as well as a shrine to Sambathe.

The defects here were related to the ones at Pergamum, but appear to have been much more entrenched. This church lacked zeal, godly discipline, correct doctrine and also allowed false leaders to continue to preach false doctrine. We do not know how the

church there began, but some speculate that either Lydia or Paul established it. It ceased to exist at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century after it became the center for Montanism<sup>ii</sup>.

## I. The Speaker

v. 18

In keeping with this message of judgment, Christ describes Himself here as the “Son of God” rather than as the “Son of Man”. He reiterates His deity to reflect how serious the deviation of this church is from the truth. Interestingly, this is the first time Christ has a title rather than a descriptive attitude in His introduction to a church.

He adds that He has “eyes like a flame of fire” ( see also 1:14 & 19:12 ) and this denotes fierceness against His enemies alongside piercing intelligence – eyes that search out hearts & attitudes – IOW – Omniscience.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> descriptor is His feet, “like burnished bronze”. This is also a reference back to 1:15 ( moral purity ) and suggests here a purging and trampling ( 2:27 ) of sinfulness.

## II. The Commendation

v. 19

Although Thyatira is about to receive some rebukes for her acceptance of false religious practices, this church is said to have love & service, which none of the 3 preceding churches were commended for. They had works to be commended - love, faith, service & patient endurance.

The faith mentioned here, given the nature of what follows, was most likely associated with a remnant of the church standing against those who were deviating from the faith and from whatever persecution they might be suffering under. ②

Their service ( Greek “*diakonos*”, not “*doulos*” ) was apparently tied to assisting those who had need of physical sustenance and was supported by the love that had been notably absent in Ephesus. The works here were coupled with love ( *agapaō* ).

Patient endurance is the result of real faith operating under persecution, pressure from peers, pressures from society, & from the trade guilds, etc. Their works had gotten stronger as they had matured – more in number or more in quality, maybe both – so that whatever Christ says next, this church is seen to have some exemplary elements in it.

## III. The Rebuke

vv. 20-24

The danger to this church was chiefly internal ( “you tolerate” ) rather than external – a false prophetess was teaching there, and they were not fighting against this but were tolerating it, letting it go on.

Obviously, this is not the original Jezebel who had been the wicked wife of King Ahab in I Kings 16ff. She had desired to bring Israel into full orb'd Baal worship. It is likely that this name used here is not the actual name of this prophetess either, but that she personified the spirit of Jezebel. Just as the weak & wicked King Ahab had tolerated his wife's evil, the church at Thyatira allowed her to teach error and persecute the righteous.

The obvious conclusion is that this was not a group of people ( like the Nicolaitans ), but one charismatic person who had some power & influence in that church & city. She “calls herself a prophetess”, thus claiming to speak for God, but she was really leading people away from God. Her leadership was teaching & seducing people to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols - fleshly pleasure was the enticement used to draw people aside from God’s call to purity & holiness.

These were some of the same errors taught by the Nicolaitans – only 40 miles away, so she may have been a Nicolaitan devotee – cf. 2:15 – in fact, that is very likely. It is possible that the trade guilds had guidelines to be followed that may have included occasional feasts where eating food sacrificed to idols was part of the ceremony & Jezebel used this to her advantage. These trade guilds were dominant in Thyatira as they were nowhere else.

Verse 21 tells us that Christ gave her time to repent, which tends to tell us that this had gone on for a long time. We are not sure how the warning had been delivered ( possibly by John himself ) but it had been sufficiently long ago enough that repentance was not forthcoming or likely. She refused to repent of her sexual immorality especially, and this may have been literal sexual immorality or it could be spiritual immorality, as she seduced people away from the truth of God’s word towards idols. The OT Jezebel was also accused of harlotry ( II Kings 9:22 ) for drawing Israel into idolatry & harlotry is often used in the OT to portray those who forsook God for idols ( cf. Hosea ). In any case, OT Jezebel was also an actual adulteress ( II Kings 9:22,30; Jer. 4:30; Nah. 3:4 ) and it is entirely plausible that this one was as well.

The consequences of refusal to repent would be horrific, and it is meant to contrast ( v. 22 ) a sick bed with a bed of adultery. She will be punished where she has sinned – a fitting judgment which would connect the judgment with the sin, This bed of sickness could very well lead to death & eventually to Hell itself. Likewise, those who are seduced & commit adultery with her will receive the same fate – “great tribulation” – unless they repent. She has refused to repent, but there appears to be some hope of repentance for those who have committed vulgar acts with her. ③

This phrase, “strike her children dead” in the Greek carries the connotation of “with a pestilence” – cf. Ezek. 33:27. where the same phrase is used. The death of these children, according to what follows in v. 23b, will become public knowledge among the 7 churches and will be the impetus for them to recognize the omniscience & righteous judgment of Christ. ( cf. Jer. 17:10 ). The immediate impact would of course be in a local setting, with the 7 churches, however, as these 7 represent all churches there is a recognition here of Christ’s power that we cannot afford to ignore in our time either. Christ will judge righteously because He alone knows the hearts and minds of men, not just the deeds but the motives behind those deeds. I Cor. 4:5 is helpful here.

Christ’s pronouncement now shifts – in v. 24 – away from judgment for those who were idolaters to the people in the church to encouragement for those who were still faithful. These people “had not learned the deep things of Satan” and were being singled out within this church for special consideration. This is unique in the 7 letters at this point. It is not known if this group is in the minority or majority in this church but the former is most likely. In any case, Christ promises to these people who had not been duped into following this false teaching not to lay any further burden on them, which is likely a reference to further suffering. These faithful people could very well have been under ridicule or persecution because they were not “going along with the crowd.

## IV. The Commendation & Challenge      vv. 25-29

They were to hold fast until Jesus came to them. This appears in English as a new sentence, but it is most likely a continuation of v. 24 – ie. ) “I do not lay on you any other burden, only to hold fast what you have till I come.” This sets forth a challenge to vigorously keep standing against this false teaching.

This “till I come” is seen by most expositors as a reference to Jesus’ 2<sup>nd</sup> coming and in a representative universal church sense, surely is designating that the faithful must stand, anticipating His return at any time. In light of what follows in chapters 4-19, this promise must mean an imminent return rather than the one described at the end of the Tribulation period in chapter 19. Otherwise, these faithful followers would receive the same earthly judgment as the unfaithful idolaters He has just rebuked. In a local sense, in the context of this letter, it would carry a meaning more akin to Christ somehow coming ( figuratively ) in judgment on those wicked – cf. vv. 22-23 & I Cor. 11:28-32.

As in each letter, there is now a commendation / promise for the one who overcomes or conquers. Once again, as has been mentioned earlier, this conquering is to be a normal thing for one called a Christian. It is not reserved for some special brand of Christian who alone overcomes but all Christians should be overcomers, not being led astray by the lure of the world, the flesh and the devil. This Christian also, by overcoming, keeps God’s word and performs works that show repentance has occurred and is continuing to occur.

Thyatira is the only one of the 7 churches to receive a double promise to the one who conquers:

- Authority over the nations
- The Morning Star

The first recalls Psalm 2:8,9 which is in that context a promise from the Father to the Son but here means that overcomers will share Jesus victory over His enemies. This is a prophetic promise regarding Jesus’ millennial reign and also carries a sense of possibly even violence – as those who come under this rule are to be ruled with a “rod of iron”, even to the extent of being “broken in pieces”. This is a strong implied threat embedded in the promise to the conquerors which applies to those followers of Jezebel, or any false leader.

These 2 verses – 26-27 – are the first real reference to the millennial kingdom in Revelation, which Jesus establishes after His return to earth. During that time, earth will be ruled by Christ from David’s throne in Jerusalem and those at His side who have, by their faithful lives earned the right to rule over some part of His kingdom as His representative – cf. Luke 22:25-29; 19:11-19, 20-26.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> promise to the overcomers at Thyatira is “the morning star”. Many argue that this is Jesus Himself as their gift or reward – He is after all, called “the bright & morning star” in Rev. 22:16, and that is possible, but it would be an odd way for Jesus to refer to Himself. A better interpretation is the promise that the righteous will shine as stars in the kingdom<sup>iii</sup>. Since Jesus, as the bright and morning star would shine brightest as a result of His intrinsic glory, His conquest over His enemies is in sight and is tied to the authority to rule just promised to these overcomers. Note Daniel 12:2-3; Matt. 13:43; Phil. 2:15 – where the righteous &/or their deeds are seen to be as shining stars.

This view reinforces the first part of the promise as no other interpretation does. As overcomers, we know we have Jesus, so if He is the morning star here, this seems to be a redundant promise – the very motivation to stand fast by overcomers is already tied to the promise of having Christ. So, instead this promise makes more sense to show what the overcomers will become, not receive.

The familiar formula in v. 29 now appears at the end of this, the fourth letter, rather than preceding the promises as it did in the previous 3 letters, and begins the same trend for the final 3 letters. No one has discovered an appreciable reason for this change in form.

### Next lesson – Rev. 3: 1-6    The Church at Sardis

---

<sup>i</sup> Ephesus – 7 verses; Smyrna – 5 verses; Pergamum – 6 verses; Thyatira – 11 verses; Sardis – 6 verses; Philadelphia – 7 verses; & Laodicea – 9 verses.

<sup>ii</sup> Montanism – a 2<sup>nd</sup> century apocalyptic movement; its' adherents expected a speedy outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Church, and claimed to see this in their first leaders. Montanus began preaching in Phrygia in 156/7 or 172 AD. A later offshoot of this movement under Tertullian disallowed 2<sup>nd</sup> marriages; condemned existing fasting rules as too lax & forbade one to flee persecution. ( source – Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church. )

<sup>iii</sup> Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7; pg. 235.