

# **The Disaster of the Church that Tolerates Sin**

## **Introduction**

### **A. Entanglement with the World**

The letter to Thyatira in Revelation 2:18-29 is the longest of the seven letters, and it is written to the most insignificant of the seven cities. This letter closely follows the thought of the letter to Pergamos. The compromise with sin, Satan, and the world that began in Pergamos becomes full scale in Thyatira. If the church at Pergamos married the world, then the church at Thyatira had been living with it for a long time. It had become entrenched in the world. The letter shows the depths of sin that compromise brings: full scale idolatry and immorality.

The church at Thyatira represents the church that is absorbed by the world. It was literally living with the world. There are also churches today that name the name of Christ but are totally involved with the world. There are Christians who call themselves disciples of Christ but they are really disciples of Satan and the world.

### **B. Evils of Idolatry**

The evils of idolatry had penetrated deeply into the church at Thyatira. For example:

#### **1. THE WICKEDNESS OF JEZEBEL**

In Revelation 2:20 we will meet a woman who is called Jezebel. That does not mean that her real name was Jezebel; she may have become known as Jezebel because her works so closely paralleled those of Jezebel in the Old Testament (1 Kgs. 16:31; 18:1--21:29). That Jezebel caused Israel to be wed to Baal: When Ahab, the king of Israel, married her, he married the world and paganism because she brought Baal worship into the nation. That is exactly what Jezebel of Thyatira did--she married the church to the world and brought in paganism, which resulted in immorality and idolatry. Both Jezebels succeeded in corrupting God's assembly by initiating a marriage to paganism.

#### **2. THE DEPTHS OF SATAN**

In Revelation 2:24 we see a comment regarding "the depths of Satan." What began as an aberrant teaching in the church at Pergamos became full-scale activity in a mystic cult of worldliness at Thyatira. The church tolerated sin, apostasy, idolatry, and communal feasts (where sacrifices were offered to idols, eaten by the people, and followed by an orgy). The church even became deeply involved in those things! Once the church married the world, it became absorbed by the world.

As we look at the letter to the church at Thyatira, let's begin with ...

## **I. THE CORRESPONDENT (v. 18)**

"And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These things saith the Son of God, who hath His eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like fine bronze."

### **A. The Picture of Christ**

That is not a very comforting picture. When Jesus Christ wrote this letter to the Thyatiran church, He wasn't giving them any comfort; He was giving them a portrait of penetrating judgment. When a church reaches a high level of sinfulness, Christ stops being their companion and starts being their judge. With His eyes like a flame of fire, He sees through their flaws to the reality of their sin. His feet like burnished brass are ready to trample on their sin. Bronze, or brass, is the symbol of judgment.

#### **1. THE CONTRAST OF TITLES**

The description of Christ in verse 18 is the same as the description of the glorified Christ in Revelation 1:14-15: "... His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet like fine bronze, as if they burned in a furnace ...."

In each of the letters we have studied, the description of the correspondent is taken from the vision of the glorified Christ in Revelation 1. There has always been a parallel. That is also true in this description, but with one significant difference. Revelation 2:18 says, "... These things saith the Son of **God** ...." But Revelation 1:13 says, "And in the midst of the seven lampstands [stands] one like the Son of **Man** ...." In the letter to the church at Thyatira, Jesus Christ is no longer designated as the Son of man; He is designated as the Son of God. Why? The Son of man designates Christ in His humanness, as He ministers to the churches in love and tenderness. But when He writes to the Thyatiran church, He is no longer the Son of man. He is no longer seen in His humanness; He is seen as God coming in divine and penetrating judgment. The Holy Spirit never makes a mistake in the names of Christ that He chooses. Christ's deity is emphasized because He is not coming to help them; He is coming as God to judge them because of sin. He is no longer the sympathetic Savior; He becomes the judge.

#### **2. THE CHARACTER OF JUDGMENT**

##### **a. Eyes Like a Flame of Fire**

There is nothing more penetrating than fire. Everything yields to it. It consumes all opposition, and sweeps down all obstructions with invincible power. Christ is described as having eyes of flaming fire that penetrate the walls of the human heart to reveal hidden sin. The eyes of the Son of God are able to see through everything--piercing all masks, shredding all coverings, and searching the remotest recesses to see the hidden things of the soul. There is no escape.

##### **b. Feet Like Fine Bronze**

When Christ saw what was happening at the church of Thyatira, He was ready to come in judgment to crush sin. A description of that type of judgment is found in Revelation 19:15: "... He treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God." Christ comes in power to crush sin under His feet.

When the church marries the world, Christ gets upset--so upset that He may kill some Christians (Rev. 2:23). That is a terrifying picture of judgment. God does not tolerate sin. Christ does not tolerate a church married to the world. That is why the introduction of the world into the church is a devastating problem.

## **B. The Punishment by Christ**

### 1. A FRIGHTENING PASSAGE

Hebrews 10:26-31 is one of the most frightening passages in the Bible. This is what God thinks of sin: "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses; of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, with which He was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know Him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto Me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

### 2. A FRIGHTENING PUNISHMENT

Christ will come in serious judgment. God deals with sin even among His own people. He has provided an escape from sin's power, penalty, and presence. But if men refuse the way of escape--if they refuse the sacrifice of Christ and the forgiveness of God, then they will be caught in God's judgment on sin. In addition, God may have to punish some believers so severely that they may lose their life (1 Jn. 5:16). They won't lose their salvation; God may remove them because they have become a stumbling block.

We have seen the correspondent: Christ gives solemn words to the church. Now let's notice ...

## **II. THE CITY (v. 18)**

### **A. Its Strategic Significance**

Thyatira was located exactly thirty miles from both Sardis and Pergamos (the capital city of Asia Minor for three hundred years). Thyatira still exists today with a population of approximately twenty-five thousand. Thyatira had one purpose: to act as an interceptor of any armies approaching Pergamos. Since Pergamos was the capital, it was the most threatened city of Asia Minor. But the armies would have to defeat Thyatira first.

## **B. Its Religious Significance**

Thyatira wasn't the center of any kind of worship. There weren't any temples. It did have the shrine of a satanic priestess called the Sambath<sup>^</sup>e. She would tell fortunes for a certain sum. But for the most part, the people of Thyatira worshiped the gods that the rest of Asia Minor worshiped in those days. It was as immoral as any other pagan culture in that area. That was the environment of the church at Thyatira.

The next point in our outline is ...

## **III. THE CHURCH (v. 18)**

### **A. The Preparation**

We can't be sure who started the church at Thyatira, but we can guess that Lydia did. She was from Thyatira, and was won to Christ by Paul when she was on business in Philippi, which is in Macedonia (Ac. 16:14-15). Luke also tells us that her family was converted. It is very likely that Lydia went back to Thyatira with her family, and they became the nucleus of the church there.

### **B. The Problem**

#### **1. JEZEBEL'S DOMINANCE**

The problem that faced the body of believers at Thyatira was not persecution; the church was being completely dominated by the woman Jezebel, and all of the evil people that followed what she was propagating. The little group of true believers didn't have the opportunity to go to another church because there weren't any others. They didn't have many options, so they lived with the problems.

#### **2. JEZEBEL'S DESIGN**

Jezebel had brought the church into total involvement with the world. Her design was to force Christians to compromise by marrying the church to the world, just as the Old Testament Jezebel had married Israel to Baal worship (1 Kgs. 16:31-33).

##### **a. Her Pretense**

I imagine that her pretense might have been based on the fact that compromise would be good business policy because of the number of guilds in Thyatira. Guilds were the forerunner to labor unions. People of certain trades would congregate to decide on basic wage scales and other work-oriented issues, much as a union does today. If a Christian didn't want to belong to a guild, he would find it difficult to get a job.

You say, "Why wouldn't he want to belong to a guild?" The guilds weren't just involved in labor; they were also social groups. Anyone who belonged to a guild went along with

everything the guild did, including communal feasts, sacrifices, and orgies. Consequently, Christians stayed away from the guilds.

### b. **Her Prompting**

I imagine that Jezebel may have prompted the Christians on a commercial basis. She may have even suggested, "How are we going to win the world unless we join the guilds?" Many people joined them. As a result they brought sin, idol worship, and immorality into the church.

Now let's look at ...

## **IV. THE COMMENDATION (v. 19)**

"I know thy works, and love, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first."

They were improving. There was a little group of people in the midst of that unbelievable mess who were progressing. They were the true believers.

### **A. The Divine Pairing**

Notice that Christ pairs up their virtues.

#### 1. LOVE AND SERVICE

He says, "I know thy ... love ...." Of the churches we have studied, this is the only church that He says has love. While love was decreasing at Ephesus, it was increasing at Thyatira. They weren't hurting for love.

Their love issued in service, which is the outgrowth of love. When you love, you minister. The Greek word for service is diakonia. The English word deacon comes from it. It also means "minister." As a result of their love, the church at Thyatira was a serving church.

#### 2. FAITH AND SERVICE

Christ says, "You have faith. As a result of your faith, you are a patient church." When you believe God, you don't worry; you wait on Him.

Love results in service, and faith results in patience (Gk. hupomon<sup>^</sup>e = "steadfast endurance"). The church at Thyatira was to be commended because they were advancing in spirituality.

### **B. The Deadly Polarization**

Of the churches that Christ has addressed to this point, the church at Thyatira was the only one He had commended for love. Yet it had a gross sin problem. The church had love, but it also had an abundance of sin. You say, "What's the problem?" The church didn't have sound doctrine. The balance that God demands is love and sound doctrine. The church at Thyatira didn't have that balance. The church at Ephesus was the opposite; it had sound doctrine. The members were finding the false prophets and kicking them out of the church as soon as they opened their mouth. But they didn't have love. As a result, the church was eventually destroyed. There has to be a balance of love and sound doctrine. Either polarization is deadly.

### The Polarized Church

If you analyzed the Christian world today, you would find that this polarization still exists.

#### 1. DOCTRINAL PERFECTIONISTS

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you are undoubtedly on twenty or thirty mailing lists. You may have noticed that we have our extremists today--the moral, doctrinal perfectionists who are loveless, ruthless, and horribly offensive while standing for the truth. But nobody can stand them. They have sound doctrine but none of the love. Their ministry takes place in a goldfish bowl: They spend most of their time having conferences with each other, or sending out papers.

#### 2. TOLERANT SENTIMENTALISTS

These people constantly preach a meaningless, tolerant sentimentalism and call it love. But love never soothes sin. True love says, "With tears in my eyes I tell you that without Jesus Christ, you're on your way to hell. Without Christ you have no place in the fellowship of His body." But love also says that you can know Christ. It doesn't say, "We will take you into the fellowship like you are." That's not love; that's sentimentalism. Without sound doctrine, love is a joke. You can tell your child, "I love you; do what you want," but that isn't love. If you love your child, you will say, "I love you, but now I have to spank you," when you need to.

A pastor told me, "When I was young in the pastorate, the people of the church used to tell my wife, 'You're too hard on your children--you discipline them too much.'" Today all of his children are serving Jesus Christ, or are preparing to serve Him.

The essence of love is a balance between love and sound doctrine. The church at Thyatira had love but no sound doctrine.

Next, let's look at ...

### **V. THE COMMENDATION (vv. 20-23)**

## A. Thyatira's Tolerance of Jezebel (v. 20)

"Notwithstanding, I have a few things against thee [better translated, 'I have this against you'], because thou allowest that woman, Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols."

Christ is saying, "I'm upset because you tolerate sexual sin and idolatry, which I hate. You shall have no other gods before Me." The church at Thyatira tolerated Jezebel and her doctrine. The people never got rid of her; they allowed her to exist in the church.

### Exposing and Eliminating Sin

If the church is going to be what Christ wants it to be, it must expose and eliminate sin. Someone will say, "You can't throw people out; that's demonstrating a lack of love." No, that's not true. Sound doctrine is the issue, not love. You don't deal with sin in a sentimental way, but according to God's Word. He says to put it out of the church.

Christ is adamant about eliminating sexual sin from the church. For example, 1 Corinthians 5 is Paul's commentary on the attitude that the church must have toward discipline. When sexual sin exists in the church, God deals harshly with it. Paul says, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he hath done this deed ..." (vv. 1-2). Instead of being sorry, the Corinthians were proud about what happened.

In verses 4-5 Paul says, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Paul is saying, "Get sin out of your church by turning that person loose so that Satan may destroy his body in order that his soul might be redeemed." What does Paul mean by that? He might mean to allow Satan the opportunity to pull him so deeply into sin that he will finally turn to God. He may also mean that Satan will destroy his body literally so that Christ will take his spirit home to be with Him. Either way, it is a serious situation. When there is that kind of sin in the church, it must be put out. Paul says, "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out, therefore, the old leaven ..." (vv. 6-7).

The Bible is absolutely intolerant of sin in the church. It is also intolerant of sin in our lives. If the church isn't pure, it doesn't have a message for the world. That problem is characteristic of many churches today. The church cannot mix fellowship with sin.

## 1. THE OLD TESTAMENT PARALLEL

### a. Jezebel's Perversion

We don't know who the Jezebel in Thyatira was. She is called Jezebel because she parallels the Old Testament Jezebel. The latter was the notorious daughter of Ethbaal, who was the king of the Sidonians (1 Kgs. 16:31). The Sidonians were famous for worshipping the false god Baal. When Jezebel married Ahab, Baal worship was set up in Israel. Elijah became upset and forced the issue at Mount Carmel. He said, "We are going to decide this issue. If God is God, then He will send fire; if Baal is God, then he will send fire" (1 Kgs. 18:20-40). Temples to Baal had been set up everywhere. Donald Grey Barnhouse said that the priests of Baal were wicked sex perverts. That was the kind of perversion that Jezebel had brought into the church at Thyatira.

The same thing is happening today. Sin is brought into the church under the guise of a new morality. But it's not new; it's revitalized Baal worship. I have heard preachers who advocate such morality. A chaplain at a so-called Christian college advocated premarital sex for anybody who honestly felt that they were in love. The students agreed unanimously that it was the finest chapel message they had ever attended. When depravity is turned loose like that, you can expect that kind of response.

### **b. God's Punishment**

Do you know how God deals with that depravity? Remember what He did to Jezebel? She was pushed out of a window and the dogs ate her (2 Kgs. 9:30-37). You can't end up any lower than that! When the Bible wants to refer to someone as the scum of all scum in Hebrew, it calls him a dog. To be eaten by dogs is serious judgment. Don't make light of sin.

## **2. THE NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLE**

The Jezebel of the New Testament church in Thyatira was a parallel to the Old Testament Jezebel who married the church to the world and brought in idolatry and sexual sin. The Jezebel at Thyatira calls herself a prophetess in Revelation 2:20. There have been many women in history who have claimed to be prophets of God: Annie Besant, Madame Blavatsky (popularizers of theosophy), and Mary Baker Eddy (a popularizer of Christian Science). Every time I see a religion or cult that has a woman who claims to be a prophet, I have a problem with it. I am not saying that God can't redeem some of the people who are in those situations, because He can. Jezebel claimed that she was a prophetess speaking the deep things of God. But Jesus said that she and her followers were actually speaking about the deep things of Satan (Rev. 2:24).

### **B. Christ's Intolerance of Jezebel (vv. 21-23)**

#### **1. HIS PATIENCE (v. 21)**

"And I gave her space to repent of her fornication, and she repented not."

God was gracious to this Jezebel. He doesn't want to destroy people, He wants to love them and win them to Himself. But Jezebel did not repent.

## 2. HIS PUNISHMENT (vv. 22-23a)

### a. **Casting Her into Bed** (v. 22)

#### 1) A Place of Immorality (v. 22a)

"Behold, I will cast her into a bed ..."

You say, "What does He mean?" Everything Jezebel advocated took place on a bed, such as sexual immorality. The Romans didn't sit on the floor like the Orientals, or sit in a chair like the Europeans and Americans; they laid on a bed. So Christ says, "Jezebel, if you like beds so much, I'll put you in one." But what kind of bed?

#### 2) A Place of Tribulation (v. 22b)

"... and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds."

There is still a vestige of grace. Christ asks Jezebel and her followers to repent a second time. So Christ says to Jezebel, "Since you like beds, I will give you a bed of tribulation-- a bed of death. And everyone that commits adultery with you and follows other gods, idols, false prophets, sin, and immorality, will be thrown in that bed with you."

### b. **Killing Her Children** (v. 23a)

"And I will kill her children with death ..."

Everyone who imitates Jezebel's activity is in danger of death at the hands of Christ. That is serious! The warning could refer to unbelievers, or to believers who are totally out of fellowship with Christ. Associated with the church are unbelievers who are hypocrites, and believers who are living in sin. The people who live like that are called the children of Jezebel because their lives are patterned after her conduct. Christ says, "I will kill them." Why?

## 3. HIS PURPOSE (v. 23b)

"... and all the churches shall know that I am He who searcheth the minds and hearts; and I will give unto every one of you according to your works."

Christ is saying, "The churches will know that they can't hide anything from Me. If something like what has happened at Thyatira occurs at another church, I may remove some of its members until it realizes its sin." That's how much God hates sin.

Jesus Christ died to purchase the church and present it blameless to God, "not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing ..." (Eph. 5:27). When the church becomes polluted with sin, Christ removes that sin because He wants to keep the church pure. We often

think of Christ as the loving Savior--and He is--but when He judges, He is seen with eyes like a flame of fire and feet of burning bronze. If the church does not keep its ranks pure with discipline, then Christ will make it pure by removing the stain.

Will Christ Take the Life of a Believer?

It is possible that Christ will take the life of a believer. For example:

1. 1 CORINTHIANS 11:29-30 -- In verse 29 Paul accused some of the Corinthians of misusing the Lord's supper. In verse 30 he says, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." Some of them died because of how they treated the Lord's table of remembrance.

2. 1 JOHN 5:16 -- John says that we should pray for our brother, but not to if he has committed the sin unto death. You say, "What sin is that?" It is no particular sin--just the sin that is the straw that breaks the camel's back. When the sinful life of a believer becomes a great stumbling block, God takes him home. It can happen.

Now let's look at...

## **VI. THE COMMAND** (vv. 22b, 24-25)

### **A. A Full Repentance** (v. 22b)

"...repent of [your] deeds."

Christ is talking to professing Christians, not true Christians. He may also be addressing true Christians living in sin. If you call yourself a Christian, but are married to the world, living in sin, and defiling your covenant with Christ, then repent before Christ removes you. That is a solemn warning. Christ wants a pure church. There is no place for worldliness or compromise. Sin must be dealt with.

### **B. A Final Reminder** (vv. 24-25)

"But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine [of Jezebel], and who have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak, I will put upon you no other burden. But that which ye have already, hold fast till I come."

## 1. ENCOURAGEMENT

In Malachi 3:1-6 God tells Israel that He is going to come in judgment. Verse 16 says, "... they that feared the +LORD spoke often one to another ...." The faithful people didn't know what would happen to them. Instead of talking to God, they mumbled to each other. But He heard them. Verses 16-17 say, "... a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the +LORD, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be

Mine, saith the +LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels ...." The people brightened up at that, saying, "We won't be a part of the judgment!"

## 2. EXHORTATION

God says the same thing to the faithful group at Thyatira: "I may have to judge the church, but hang on until I come. I'm not going to put any more burdens on you." He says the same thing to us. The Greek word for "hold fast" is krate<sup>o</sup>, which means, "to be strong or mighty." That implies that holding on to what they had wouldn't be easy (Rev. 2:19). Christ uses a strong word to indicate that Satan is going to be tough on them, and that they will need to hang on tight.

Christ commands the ungodly to repent. He commands the Christian in sin to do the same. He says this to the believer who is true to the faith: "Hang on! I'm not going to put any more burdens on you. Just hold fast."

Christ closes the letter with ...

## **VII. THE COUNSEL** (vv. 26-29)

Christ closes with a word to the overcomers. First John 5:5 identifies the overcomers: "Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" Whoever is redeemed is an overcomer.

### **A. The Proof of the Overcomer** (v. 26a)

"And he that overcometh, and keepeth My works unto the end ..."

That is the proof that a person is an overcomer.

### **B. The Promises to the Overcomer** (vv. 26b-28)

What will the overcomer be able to do?

#### 1. TO SHARE IN THE REIGN OF CHRIST (vv. 26b-27)

"... to him will I give power over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers, even as I received of My Father."

When Christ returns in His Kingdom, He will reign for a thousand years on earth. Before that, the church will have left the earth in the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Seven years of tribulation then follow. Afterwards the church will return with Christ for the thousand-year Kingdom. During that time, Christ will reign as King of kings.

##### a. Ruling with Judgment

Christ will rule with a rod of iron--there will be instant, divine judgment upon sin. He will not rule alone; all of the overcomers will rule with Him. We will be ruling over all of the nations of the world that will exist at that time with the power of judgment. Christ says, "And he shall rule over them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers ...." That refers to the enemies of God. Then He says, "... even as I received of My Father" (v. 27). What does He mean by that? Christ said, "... the Father ... hath committed all judgment unto the Son" (Jn. 5:22), and He is granting a portion of it to us. Those who know Christ in the Kingdom will rule with Him.

### **b. Sheperding with Mercy**

The word "rule" is poimain<sup>o</sup> in the Greek text. It literally means, "to shepherd." Our rule will involve not only the execution of judgment, but the administration of mercy and direction to the sheep as well. That's a beautiful combination.

### **2. TO RECEIVE THE MORNING STAR (v. 28)**

"And I will give him the morning star."

You say, "What is the morning star?" Revelation 22:16 says, "I, Jesus, have sent Mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star." Someday, the morning star will be mine--and the morning star is Jesus Christ. He will be yours and mine. There won't be any distractions in eternity. I totally belong to Christ now, but I will never experience all that He is until the day I see Him.

Why is Jesus called the "morning star"? Because He will be like the dawn of the Kingdom. The first thing that rises in the day is the morning star. When the morning star rises at the dawn of the Kingdom, Jesus Christ will be fully mine.

There are two things the overcomer will be able to do: reign with Christ and possess Him for his own.

### **C. The Perception of the Overcomer (v. 29)**

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

Two things stand out in my mind as we conclude. First, the picture of sin in Revelation 2:18-29 has been devastating. You now know what God thinks of a church that marries the world. Second, two descriptions of Christ stand out. The first description portrays Christ as coming in fierce wrath and penetrating judgment. For some people, that is the only Christ they will ever know because they refuse Him as Savior. However, the other picture is of Christ as the morning star. Which Christ do you know? The choice is yours.