

# The Church at Thyatira

## 2: 18-29

**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 of Weeks, **the Lord** demonstrated **His** commitment to a pure **church** by executing Ananias and Sapphira (**Acts 5:1-11**). The apostle Paul was also passionate about the purity of **the church** at Corinth (**1 Corinthians 5:1-5; Second 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.<sup>82</sup>

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 belief's are equal?

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** (Daniel 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. 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 Thyatira, 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, 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.<sup>83</sup>

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 that life style was dragging them down.

5. **The concern:** So outwardly they seemed to be doing well. It's 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 - Women in Ministry**). But a **woman** who called **herself a prophetess** was courting them. False teaching can come from gifted people. **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.

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**.<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup>

When a **woman** is used symbolically in Scripture, she represents a religious entity either positively or negatively. On the positive side, there is Isra'el as the Wife of **ADONAI** and **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 Israel 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 Israel (**First Kings 16:29-33**). Through **Jezebel**, Baal 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.<sup>86</sup> 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 Nicolaitians 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.<sup>87</sup>

Graciously, **Yeshua** 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 **Jesus** 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** to punish **Jezebel** with some sort of sickness.<sup>88</sup> 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**.<sup>89</sup> 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 **prophetess** 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 them: **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 (**20:8-10**). 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.<sup>90</sup> 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:

<b>AD 607</b>	Boniface III made the first universally recognized pope
<b>AD 709</b>	Kissing the Pope's feet started
<b>AD 786</b>	Worshiping of images and relics
<b>AD 850</b>	The use of "holy water"
<b>AD 995</b>	Canonization of dead saints
<b>AD 998</b>	Fasting on Fridays during Lent
<b>AD 1079</b>	Celibacy of the priesthood
<b>AD 1090</b>	Prayer beads introduced
<b>AD 1184</b>	The Inquisition
<b>AD 1190</b>	Sale of Indulgences started
<b>AD 1215</b>	The doctrine of transubstantiation started
<b>AD 1220</b>	Worship of the wafer or host
<b>AD 1229</b>	The Bible was forbidden to the common people
<b>AD 1414</b>	The communion cup was forbidden to the common people
<b>AD 1439</b>	The doctrine of purgatory was decreed
<b>AD 1439</b>	The doctrine of the seven sacraments was affirmed
<b>AD 1508</b>	The Ave Maria was approved
<b>AD 1534</b>	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 the **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 **the Lord'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**.<sup>91</sup> Once **the church** 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.