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REVELATION 2: 18 – 29

THYATIRA – LOYAL, BUT OPEN TO FALSE TEACHING

When we turn to the next one of the seven churches the exalted Christ is addressing in the book of Revelation, the church at Thyatira, we begin the second half of the roundtrip that the messenger had to make, who had to deliver John's letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor. We go from Pergamum, about 60 km South East, to Thyatira. It is on the road to Sardis, which comes next.

Thyatira was much farther away from the coast, and was located in a low valley, surrounded by hills. It was quite a bit smaller than the previous cities, more a town than a city, we would say today. Under Persian, Greek, and Roman rule it had often been a garrison town, and so a relatively large number of veterans had settled there.

Thyatira was not a powerful political centre, like Pergamum, or a busy port with a strong international flavour, like Ephesus. It was a centre of trade and manufacturing goods, with craftsmen, like weavers, tailors, dyers, leather-workers, bronze-smiths, potters. And it was famous for its purple cloth.

In Acts 16, we read about Lydia from Thyatira who was *a seller of purple goods*. When Paul met her in Philippi, she may have been on a business-trip,

or she may have settled there and imported the purple goods from her hometown.

This gives some background here, because these craftsmen were organized in some kind of unions – the trade-guilds. And these trade-guilds were, as was everything in that society, associated with idols. Every guild had its own “guardian god”, so to speak. Such a god was always worshipped in their meetings and at their festivals.

For pagans, the area of industry, trade, and business was not spiritually neutral. As a member you were expected to participate in everything and to eat the food sacrificed to idols. And when it turned into sexually immoral entertainment, you could not just walk out. You would be ridiculed, or worse, given a hard time.

In other words, if you wanted to make a living as a potter or a weaver, and you wanted your business to flourish, you had to be a member of such a trade-guild. If not, you would lose your position in society, you would be shunned, lose jobs, lose work, and the result: no food on the table.

This would be your dilemma as a Christian in Thyatira. Satan would challenge you and attack you, in particular, in your daily work. What do you do? On the one hand, if you participate in these trade-guild activities you are in trouble, because you deny Jesus Christ. And on the other hand, if you do not participate you are also in trouble. You might as well close shop because you cannot provide for your family. That is a gloomy and discouraging perspective.

Today, in a different time and a different culture, it can also be difficult for us. How does Satan challenge and attack your faith today in your daily work, when you go to the office or the jobsite, or when you meet with customers, or when you’re on a business trip? Do you ever face this dilemma that it would be good for business to do a certain thing, but you know that God does not want you to do it?

Well, there is one lady in the church in Thyatira who claims to know the answer. But we will learn that her teaching will have scary consequences. It is not without reason that Christ’s message to the Thyatira congregation is

the longest one of the seven, and that from the beginning the tone is utterly serious.

This is reflected already in the way in which the exalted Christ introduces himself here. It fits again the situation in this particular church, but that does not make it less relevant for all the other churches, as well as for the whole church today.

Jesus presents himself with emphasis as “the Son of God”. That is unique in Revelation, and so this self-designation really stresses his divine and royal power. Later on (v.27) we find a quotation from Psalm 2, but there are more allusions to this psalm in this message to the church in Thyatira.

Psalm 2 is a powerfully prophetic message about the coming of God’s glorious kingdom. It is about Jesus Christ that God says: *You are my Son, today I have begotten you*. And God also says, about Christ, that he is, *the Anointed One, my King, set on Zion, my holy hill*. Well, “here I am”, says the exalted Christ to his church, “the Son of God, your messianic king as promised in Psalm 2”. Jesus Christ claims royal power and royal control over all of life, also in Thyatira.

Jesus’ distinguishing traits here are his eyes and his feet. *His eyes are like a flame of fire*. Nothing is hidden from his searing gaze. No one can deceive him. He sees and knows everything. His penetrating eyes see right through our pious facades in the church. For him, the hidden motives that make people follow false teaching are like an open book. As he says in v.23, *I search hearts and minds...*

And *his feet are like burnished bronze*. He is burning with holy zeal that will consume all evil. He has powerful feet no one can withstand as he goes forward and tramples on the wicked and the impure.

There are also good things in Thyatira. Christ praises them for their loyalty. *I know your works*, he says. I know *your love* – your deep devotion to me, your Lord. I know *your faith* – your trust in God’s grace; your faithfulness in holding on to me as your Saviour. I know *your service* – you are always willing to help others. I know *your patient endurance* – you remain faithful, despite the pressure from the culture in which you live.

And not only are these things all there, they continue to grow in this. *Your latter works exceed the first*; you are now doing more than you did in the beginning, says Christ. That is fantastic. That is the kind of growth you like to see in the church. In their journey towards the New Jerusalem, they are actually making good progress.

So, yes, there are lots of good things going on in Thyatira.

However, they are not too strict on doctrine.

In some aspects Thyatira is the opposite of Ephesus. You may remember this from one of the previous chapters in this book, the one on Revelation 2:1–7. In Ephesus they were big on pure doctrine but lacking in love. Here in Thyatira they are strong in love, but pretty careless when it comes to doctrine.

We can get stuck in this dilemma too. You have probably heard it, or even thought it yourself sometimes: “Doctrine is dry and boring. It is nothing to be excited about. No, for me it’s about a warm, loving, and joyful relationship with Jesus.”

But that is a wrong dilemma. As soon as you talk about your faith, about your relationship with Jesus, and why this is so important for you, you talk ‘doctrine’.

Think of a conversation like this.

“I don’t do doctrine. I love Jesus!”

“That’s great. Who is Jesus and why do you love him?”

“He is my Saviour and died on the cross for my sins”.

“Hey – that is doctrine!”

So, actually the real contrast is not rational, dry doctrine versus emotional excitement, but rather, good doctrine versus poor doctrine.

Well, here is the danger in Thyatira Jesus is concerned about. When you get poor doctrine, poor teaching, lots of things go wrong in the church! Indeed, as we saw, many good things are going on in Thyatira. *But*, says Christ, *I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel.*

He is probably talking about a real person, a particular dominant individual that had a lot of influence in that congregation. We mentioned her earlier

already, but she was not all alone. Later on, we find out that she had her followers, her supporters in Thyatira. According to them it was time to do away with some of the old and narrow-minded views that were only causing trouble for the Christians.

Christ calls her “Jezebel”. This was most likely not her real name. But he uses the name of a woman with a bad reputation in Israel’s history to shock the congregation. From the Old Testament we know the ‘real’ Jezebel as the wife of king Ahab. She was the evil queen, who seduced the Israelites to worship the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah.³ The Bible condemns this as ‘religious adultery’, which led to serious persecution of faithful believers.

Well, this woman here in Thyatira plays the same disastrous and destructive role in the church, as Ahab’s wife did in Israel back in the Old Testament. The name ‘Jezebel’ characterizes what this woman is doing. It shows the satanic nature of her activities. She seduces the people to sexual immorality, to walk away from worshipping the true God, to eat food sacrificed to idols. She promotes ‘religious adultery’.

It is actually quite similar to what we have seen before, when we talked about the activities of the Nicolaitans in Ephesus and in Pergamum. But here it is more serious, because this woman *calls herself a prophetess*. She claims that God reveals himself through her, that her teaching comes straight from heaven. She goes around in the congregation and says to people, “God told me this and so you better listen to me. You don’t want to disobey God, do you?”

That is pretty intimidating. And the church allowed her to carry on and gave room for her teaching. After all, you never know! God can do anything. Perhaps you should give her the benefit of the doubt. Have you ever had people say this to you: “I know for sure that God wants me (or you) to do this or that?”

But Christ is not intimidated. “She is a liar,” he says. “She is a false prophet. And what she is teaching is false doctrine. She is seducing, or misleading, my servants.” The word “misleading” shows the deceptive character of this evil. Although it is bad, it sounds good. That is why people go for it. But the

3 The story of King Ahab and Jezebel is told in 1 Kings 16 and following chapters

eyes of the exalted Christ are like blazing fire, and he sees right through this facade.

You can hear how indignant Christ is because of this attack on his church. That is why he gets into this harsh name-calling with the name 'Jezebel'. The folks in Thyatira need to wake up. They need to see that with such false teaching the church is heading for disaster. And the church needs to do something about this, like they did in Ephesus with those who claimed to be apostles (Rev. 2:2). They tested them, and when they found out they were false, these guys were out.

Of course, a real prophet or prophetess would be a blessing for the church. That would be one who says things that are in agreement with the true gospel.

But this woman is promoting infidelity toward God, spiritual adultery. She suggests that you can turn away from the Lord as the only true God, and from Jesus Christ as your only Saviour. Just go out and explore other exciting things, and merge as you see fit, whatever religious or spiritual experience you like.

When you look at v.24 you get a bit of an idea about the way she talked people into this. "If you want to conquer Satan", she argued, "you need to experience him and how he operates. As a Christian you should not withdraw from Satan's realm, but you should become familiar with his 'deep secrets', whatever they are. If you have this deep spiritual knowledge you will know that you can worship any idol. It is nothing. And you will also realize that it does not matter what you do with your body."

So, do not hesitate to participate in the trade-guilds, including idol-worship and sexual immorality. Get involved in whatever is out there. You belong to Jesus anyway, and in the end you will be a better, wiser, and more experienced Christian.

How careful are we when it comes to this? How careful are you, young people? You might think: Am I not in the covenant? I have been baptized. I have professed my faith. I love Jesus as my Saviour. Am I not born again? Is it not true that in Christ I am a new creation? Does Paul not say in Romans 8 (vs. 37 and 39) that in everything *we are more than conquerors through him who*

loved us? And that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?

And if those things are true, can we not be a bit more easy-going in the things we do and the choices we make? Is it then really such a big deal to get yourself into activities your unbelieving neighbours and friends are excited about, although these may challenge your faith? Why would it be wrong for you, as a Christian teenager, to experiment with, let's say, drugs or casual sex? Everybody else does.

Sin can always come up with excuses to do what it wants, to do what is convenient, to do what is comfortable, to do what makes us acceptable to the world and the culture in which we live. And as believers we can be persuaded that all this makes sense, as long as we forget that our God is a holy God, that he is a God who hates sin and a God who wants us to hate sin.

“Do what you want”, said Jezebel. “You will be ok. You will learn and survive Satan’s ‘deep things’”. But Christ says: “You will not be ok! You will not survive. And the church will not survive either. Jezebel is lying”. The church in Thyatira is tolerating her. They allow her to teach – but Jesus Christ hates it.

It is clear that the situation in Thyatira is quite serious. And the response of the exalted Christ shows that if you are not alert, if you do not wake up, if you do not nip it in the bud, a bad situation will only get worse.

There were actually some people who came to believe that disobeying God and experiencing for yourself the power of sin and evil would make you immune to Satan’s efforts to separate you from God’s love in Jesus Christ. In this way you can learn to make up your own mind as to what is right and wrong, what is good and bad. By nature, this idea suits us mighty fine.

But it is false doctrine. This is not what Jesus is teaching. He told us to pray: *Lead us not into temptation.*

So yes, Christ warns earnestly against the destructive influence of this woman.

But he does not leave it at that. In the messages to the other churches Christ issues warnings as he calls them to repentance. And if they refuse to repent there will be consequences. But here he goes a step further. Here the exalted

Christ says something remarkable; something unique that shows again how serious this is. He comes to punish directly.

This woman is a church member, and so she should know better. But Jesus Christ has been gracious and patient. He had given her ample time to repent from her religious adultery. But she refused. She did not want to. Despite the Saviour's patience, she is hardening herself in her sin. And now she will experience the consequences.

And this time it is not a warning for what is coming at the last judgment. No, here and now *I will throw her onto a sickbed*, says Christ. "I love my church in Thyatira so much that I will stop her destructive influence in the congregation. She will be bed-ridden with a disease or a serious illness."

And it is not only her. "I will also punish her followers, her supporters," he says. Did you notice that he distinguishes between two categories of followers? First there are those *who commit adultery together with her*. Adultery is here again a metaphor for being unfaithful toward God, turning away from him. Those are the followers that are spiritually misled. But the door of repentance is still open. *I will throw them into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works*, he says. He does not explain what kind of tribulation this is going to be.

The other category is called, in v.23, *her children*. Those are most likely not her real, physical children. He is talking about those followers that are really hardcore and totally devoted to her teaching. They have become like her, hardened in sin and unwilling to repent. *Those I will strike dead*, he says. He will kill them.

Again, the language of the exalted Christ is harsh and shocking. It is going to be a very upsetting and painful experience for the congregation in Thyatira. You can compare it with the effect that the death of Ananias and Sapphira must have had in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:1-11).

But that is the intention. That is how urgent it is to alert the congregations, to wake up the churches from the disastrous consequences of wrong ideas, false teaching, and false doctrine, promoted by people that claim to know the will of God, but do not.

Christ wants us to take this to heart. For the church in the last days it remains important that we do not ignore the urgent call to remain faithful, and that we repent when captivated by false teaching and involved in practices that are the result of those ideas. Let us talk about these things in our Bible studies in the church, but also as families, as parents and children. How alert are we? And are we able to discern? Can we tell good doctrine from poor or false doctrine?

This is indeed not only relevant for Thyatira. When these things happen, says Christ, *all the churches* – also the church where it is being proclaimed today, in the 21st century – *will know that I am he who searches mind and heart*. Whatever we hold on to when it comes to our doctrine; whatever we support when it comes to our teachings; whatever we are getting ourselves into when it comes to our practices in this world, Christ knows. Nothing remains hidden from him.

Again, it is a serious wake-up call for all the churches, also for us here, today! With his eyes like blazing fire Jesus Christ alone sees right through all the things we think, say, and do. He knows what drives us. He recognizes the ugly reality that is often hiding below the pious surface in our lives.

He claims me for himself with everything that is hidden in the deepest depth of my heart. You and I are accountable to him, as to what we do with our lives. Do not take this accountability with a grain of salt. He takes you seriously. So, we better take him seriously when he promises *to repay each of you as your works deserve*.

But this is not the end of this message from the exalted Christ, to his church in Thyatira. The good things, mentioned in v.19, show that not everyone in this congregation had followed this influential woman. Not everyone was intimidated by her teaching and had accepted her ideas as true and valuable. Not everyone had embraced the so-called “deep things of Satan”. There were people in Thyatira who wanted to have nothing to do with this Jezebel and her teaching.

That does not mean that it was easy for those brothers and sisters. As mentioned in the beginning, they had a tough time with all the hostility in town and in the church. But Jesus assures them that he will not make it more dif-

difficult for those that are struggling in those circumstances. *I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have, until I come.*

In Acts 15 we read that the “Council in Jerusalem” discussed what could be asked of Christians from the Gentiles as requirements for a Christian lifestyle in the midst of a pagan society. They agreed to draft four rules – just four! 1. *You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols*; 2. *abstain from blood*; 3. *abstain from the meat of strangled animals*; and 4. *abstain from sexual immorality*.

You will notice that two of these instructions played a big role in the church in Thyatira. That makes it quite likely that Christ refers to these rules when he says that he will not add another burden. If you want to deal with the threat of false teaching in the church, the response is not to make more rules. Do not try to rein it in by coming up with more and new regulations and burdens.

No, just stick with what you have. Remain faithful to Jesus Christ. Remember what he said in Matthew 11:30 - *My yoke is easy and my burden is light*. Hold on to the true gospel of salvation by grace alone. As Christ puts it, *hold fast what you have, until I come*.

What do you have? Remember what Jesus said in the beginning (v.19). Continue to show love. Continue to live by faith. Continue to serve one another. Continue to persevere patiently.

Resist the temptation of false teaching, false doctrine when people claim to have a message from God for you. It may sound good but put them to the test. And learn to say ‘no’ to every teaching, every doctrine that would take away your Christian freedom. In Christ you are free from sin and Satan, free to serve God.

Then, in the end, the exalted Christ will also fulfill his promise in your life.

The one who conquers and who keeps my works, he says. You who repent and do God’s will; you who by grace alone remain faithful to the end; you who reject Jezebel and her teachings – you may have it difficult today, but things will change.

The promise of the glorified Christ is so encouraging and comforting for the poor craftsmen in Thyatira. Outside of the powerful trade-guilds they must have felt helpless, powerless, little, and insignificant in many ways. What could they expect from the future? What could they do to change things?

But following Jesus Christ comes with a marvellous perspective. As God's people you are on your way to the Promised Land and everything will change. Today, the powers in this world often ridicule and oppress the believers who want to keep their conscience clear. But in the future, God's faithful believers will, with the exalted Christ, rule over the world and over the nations.

That is an amazing turn-around. But that is his promise. *Even as I myself have received authority from my Father*, says Christ, *so I will give you authority over the nations*. That is incredible. God's promise in Psalm 2:8 – *I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession* – given to the Son of God, is now going to the tanners, bronze-workers, potters, and weavers in Thyatira – yes, to all who suffer persecution, ridicule, and humiliation because of their love for Jesus.

This promise includes the destruction of God's enemies. "In me," says Jesus, "my Father in heaven will also fulfill his plan in Ps. 2:9 for you." *You will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces*. The human rebellion against Christ as King will face God's wrath. There will be nothing left to be afraid of.

To this end I will also give you the morning star, says Christ. The morning star is one of the brightest stars in the sky, and the last one to disappear from sight before sunrise. It marks the beginning of a new day.

This morning star is Jesus Christ himself. Balaam prophesied about him, when he said: *A star will come out of Jacob* (Numbers 24:17). And in Rev. 22:16 Christ calls himself *the bright morning star*.

In him, your risen and glorified Saviour, you have bright hope for the glory that is coming. In him the new day dawns, the great day of salvation that will usher in the Kingdom in which you may live in eternal communion with Jesus Christ.

2. Satan is described as sitting on a throne. He claims to rule and to be in control, opposing God's rule and authority. He wants us to be loyal to him. How does he do this in the world today? And what does he do to back up his claim? What does Christ's ascension into heaven teach us about his claim?
3. Where else in the New Testament do you find warnings against a compromising attitude towards the world? Why is the purity of the church, when it comes to doctrine and Christian life, also important for each of you personally?
4. Where else in the New Testament do you find a reference to a *two-edged sword*? How does this verse help you understand what Christ is saying here in the verses 12 and 16 to the believers in Pergamum and to believers today?

Chapter 6 – Revelation 2:18-29

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Thyatira Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. What does it look like today, in our time, to face the dilemma: if I want my business to be successful I should actually make decisions and do things that meet the requirements or expectations of our culture, but may be contrary to God's Word. How do you handle such situations? Does the New Testament have anything to say about this?
3. Do we still have prophets or prophetesses today through whom God gives us new revelations? If someone claims this, should we believe him or her? Why or why not?
4. Read Acts 5:1-11. Why were Ananias and Sapphira killed in the church in Jerusalem? And what was God's intention by doing this? How should we apply this today?

Chapter 7 – Revelation 3:1-6

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Sardis Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the