

Letter to Thyatira
Revelation 2:18-29

Introduction

From Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, and next to Thyatira, 40 miles SE of Pergamum on the road to Sardis. This is the longest letter and yet is addressed to the least important of the seven cities, a reminder that God's values are not man's values. Thyatira was not noted for political or historical importance, but it was an important commercial centre, and the large amount of trade had brought prosperity. Archaeologists have found inscriptions referring to the trade guilds in the city – bakers, bronze-workers, clothiers, cobblers, dyers, leather-workers, potters, slave dealers, tanners, weavers and wool-workers. There were more trade guilds here than in any other city in the province of Asia.

Lydia, whose story is told in Acts 16, a dealer in purple cloth, was from Thyatira. The Lord opened her heart, she believed and was baptised. Paul and Silas lodged with her. Did she later return home to Thyatira and help to plant the church there? Certainly by the time Revelation was written, Thyatira had a prosperous church with many good things to be said about it. Though like every other church, it was not without problems. And unlike some of the other churches it was not under the threat of persecution – perhaps because Emperor worship was not a noteworthy practice there.

A beautiful garden

The church at Thyatira was like a beautiful garden in which the fairest Christian graces blossomed. **I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance** (Revelation 2:19). Their attitude to the Lord, fellow believers, Christian service and Christian life was very positive. Then there was something further which was very noteworthy, and also often unusual - **and that you are now doing more than you did at first.** If Ephesus had backslidden and lost her first-love, Thyatira was moving in the opposite direction. The church was moving forward, growing, developing, progressing, and advancing.

Christian growth is variously illustrated in the New Testament, c.f. the maturing of a human being from infancy to spiritual adulthood, the increasing fruitfulness of the vine – fruit, more fruit, and much fruit. There is a tendency in spiritual life to begin with great enthusiasm and zeal. This is why young Christians often make older Christians feel ashamed, recognising themselves and how they used to be. Then as the years go by, they settle down, the keenness dies down, “spiritual middle-age spread” sets in, and they become complacent and self-satisfied.

This is especially true in the ministry. “Few ministers keep up to the end edge which was on the souls at first” (A.A.Bonar). One of the great problems of ministry is keeping the soul alive. Stagnation, coldness and staleness take over. One of the most striking things said about Whitefield was that his devotion to Christ was a growing thing. His one consuming business in life was to be a Christian, to show constancy and development in devotion. “Of him it could not be said that his best days were his

first days.” Yet this is the danger of the minister’s life. Thomas Chalmers felt the failures in his ministry were not lack of visiting or lack of study, but in prayer. Henry Moule spoke of desiring “a present trust in a present Lord”. Henry Martyn admitted that “incessant sermon making produced much strangeness” between his soul and the Lord. There is a fight to be fought every day. This is urgent, because failure here will affect many others. The bane of the evangelical pulpit is “prayerless preaching and professional praying”.

What of our Christian life? We began well, no doubt, but where are we now? Going forward, standing still or falling back? Thyatira was growing and developing. They were like the Thessalonians, in whom Paul rejoiced because their faith was growing and their love was increasing (2 Thessalonians 1:3). Are we growing in love, faith, service and perseverance?

A poisonous weed

In this beautiful garden, however, a poisonous weed had appeared and was making headway. On the surface all appeared strong and healthy. A visiting preacher or stranger would have been impressed. But on closer inspection, things were not so rosy. In the healthy body a malignant cancer was manifesting itself.

One of the female members was teaching and encouraging conduct which was contrary to Christian standards, and the church, either through cowardice or excessive patience in waiting for the tide to turn, were permitting it. **You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols** (Revelation 2:20). There was no attempt to restrain, no voice raised in protest, and no discipline.

Jezebel was possibly not her actual name, but a symbol of her character – she was likened to the Old Testament character, wife of King Ahab, who encouraged the people of God to turn away from Him and worship Baal, which was a religion specializing in sexual perversion. She had the Lord’s prophets killed, and caused idolatry and witchcraft to overrun Israel (1 Kings 16: 30ff; 18:4; 19:21,25).

That was a thousand years earlier, but now another woman had the same characteristics and she was one of the leaders of the church at Thyatira. In saying that she was a prophetess, she claimed divine inspiration and used her influence to persuade this church to engage in idolatry and sexual immorality. She was probably encouraging the Christians to take part in the ceremonies of the trade guilds, which often held feasts in heathen temples and ate meat offered to idols. Then at the end of the feasts there were orgies and unbridled licentiousness. This would have been a problem for Christians wanting to make a living and have status in society, requiring them to be in the trade guilds and engage in these practices. Could they do it? If they stuck to their Christian principles, they may lose their job, would have no trade, no money, and their families would starve. Or should they conform?

Jezebel’s influence encouraged them to abandon their principles, go with the crowd, compromise. She assured them it would be alright, no harm would be done, no need to take things too far, don’t commit commercial suicide, put money and business

before Christ and Christian standards. Religion was a private affair, so don't try to mix it with business.

If the devil cannot destroy a church by persecution, by enemies from outside, he will use its friends within – sometimes in leadership – to lower standards and compromise with the world, and so destroy its testimony. All this was going on in Thyatira before their very eyes and they were not doing anything about it. They let it happen because they were weak and spineless. Even though the church at Ephesus had lost their first-love, at least they were refusing to bear the evil self-styled apostles (Revelation 2:2,4). There are strengths and weaknesses in every church.

It is always a difficult one, how far to follow customs and practices of the world. Can we dress like the world, share the same interests? Some take things to the extreme, e.g. the Amish, who will not have “worldly” possessions like cars, ties or buttons. As we live in the real world, there are bound to be similarities – our homes, cars, food, sport, and hobbies. The main thing is that we do not compromise our Christian beliefs and standards of behaviour. We must be totally loyal in these areas, whatever the cost. We are called to holiness. **For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight** (Ephesians 1:4). **It is God's will that you should be sanctified** (1 Thessalonians 4:3). **He gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own** (Titus 2:14). **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind** (Romans 12:2).

The remedy required by the Head of the Church

The Head of the Church began the letter with “I know”. He knew all that was going on. The church may not have known all that was going on about Jezebel because a lot goes on in secret, behind locked doors and in darkness. But Christ knows all about us. He is **the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze** (Revelation 2:18), and He sees all, misses nothing. His eyes flash with anger at some of the things He sees.

When Jesus was on earth, His eyes were so powerful. The Pharisees shrivelled up in shame when **He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts** (Mark 3:5). A glance at Peter after he had denied his Lord brought regret: **The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times."** And he went outside and wept bitterly (Luke 22:61,62).

I am He who searches hearts and minds (Revelation 2:23). He knows our secret thoughts and real motives. What we hide from others is exposed as daylight to Him. **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 account** (Hebrews 4:13). **He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man** (John 2:25). If this was true of the earthly Jesus, how much more it is true of the risen Christ!

What a challenge to honesty before God. He knows if we are wasting time, he knows when we are pretending. What a challenge to holy living and constraint to live in the fear of the Lord.

The Head of the Church also spoke specifically to Jezebel and her followers. He did not mince His words about her fate if she persisted in not repenting. **So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead** (Revelation 2:22,23). Note that in New Testament times, illness and death were literal punishments, c.f. Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1), some people in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:17ff). It may still be true today, though we must never say that those who are ill and dying are being punished for sin.

Then He delivers advice to the rest of the church. Fortunately some in Thyatira had not been compromised. They had not **learned Satan's so-called deep secrets. I will not impose any other burden on you. Only hold on to what you have until I come** (Revelation 2:24,25). There was no fresh requirement or teaching, just the instruction to take a firm grip of what they had.

Paul gave a similar instruction at the end of his letter to Timothy. Perilous times were still to come, but he did not need anything more to be able to come through them. He had got Paul's example and the Scriptures, **so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work** (2 Timothy 3:17). The Scriptures are an adequate guide and give sufficient rule of faith and life. Here is where we differ from the Roman Catholics, the cults and sects.

The Head of the Church closes with two promises. Those who overcome are to have authority over the nations. The Lord would share His authority with faithful, loyal people. **Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?** (1 Corinthians 6:2). The parable of the trustworthy servant given ten cities to rule (Luke 19:17) teaches the same point, though with our present state of knowledge, we cannot fully understand all that is involved. The second promise is that the overcomer will have the Morning Star. He will share in Christ's glory as well as His authority.

Conclusion

We are to emulate Thyatira in its love, works, service, faith and patience. We must also learn not to compromise, but at all costs to be faithful. The all-seeing eye is on us. We must stand on Scripture, and we will overcome. Labour is not in vain if it is in the Lord.