



Letter to the Church in Thyatira

Revelation 2:18-29 Marc McLaren 31/5/20

We are exploring the letters written by the Apostle John in the 1st century from the Island of Patmos to seven churches spread across Asia Minor, known today as modern Turkey.

So what type of letter was John writing?

Firstly, it's a letter that faithfully records Jesus' direct words to each of the seven churches.

Revelation 1:10-11 "It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. It said, "Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

Secondly, it's a letter that draws on apocalyptic language. For many of us it might seem somewhat strange and difficult to fathom but for the letter receiver it had a familiar ring. It's the language of the Old Testament, that was particularly used when God's people, the Israelites, were exiled to places like Assyria and Babylon.

Daniel and Ezekiel are rich with this type of imagery language and many of the images are picked up in John's letters to the seven churches.

Thirdly, this rich imagery language is code language that the churches throughout Asia Minor understood, which raises the question why was this code needed? The letter was written in code so direct things could be communicated while not placing God's people and John in further danger of being persecuted. It would appear that the code was understood by those who read the letters.

Finally, Jesus is speaking firstly to the specific church the letter is addressed to and then to all churches to come through to the final day where there will be no more tears and suffering and Jesus' Kingdom has come in all its fullness.

Jesus introduces himself to the church in Thyatira as the Son of God, whose eyes are like flames of fire, and whose feet are like polished bronze.

Son of God - There can be no confusion about who is speaking and by what authority he speaks. It is the one who has existed before all time, the Father's only Son, who came and dwelt amongst his people and died and rose again forgiving people of their sins and restoring them back to the Father. He is not to be confused with the Roman emperor who `took the title son of God.

Flames of fire - Nothing is hidden or obscured from his sight.

Feet like polished bronze - The feet that have been refined in the furnace and conquered evil and stand in judgement of those who oppose him.

You might be wondering where would you find the city of Thyatira?

1st Century Thyatira was situated in Asia Minor on the main road between Pergamum and Sardis. Of all the seven cities Jesus writes to, it would have been considered the least important place. We only have limited information about Thyatira, as it has been literally built over, limiting any substantial archaeological investigation. Thyatira is known today as the modern Turkish city of Akhisar.

What we do know is Thyatira was located on a well travelled road in a fertile valley and was a prosperous town. You might recall Lydia, a trader in purple-dyed goods who was converted to Christianity 40 years earlier through Paul's ministry in Philippi, came from Thyatira.

Acts 16:13, 14 "On the Sabbath we went a little way outside the city to a riverbank, where we thought people would be meeting for prayer, and we sat down to speak with some women who had gathered there. One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth, who worshiped God. As she listened to us, the Lord opened her heart, and she accepted what Paul was saying."

Linked to the purple-dyed goods Thyatira was well known as a place where trade guilds and crafts and sports associations controlled the

local economy. If you were an artisan worker engaged in wool and linen, garment making, leather work and tanning, dying, pottery, bakery, and bronze and copper smithing membership to the relevant trade guild was compulsory.

Importantly, each guild was an incorporated organization where members paid fees to belong. The guilds owned property, conducted ritualised meetings, commissioned works and wielded a wide influence with many of the guilds being linked to the pagan religions approved by the Roman government.

As the church in Thyatira sought to live out their faith in their cultural context and challenges and Jesus had two important things to say to them.

Remembering nothing is hidden or obscured from Jesus; he has full visibility of everything that is seen and unseen in the church. Jesus says to the church, *“I know all the things you do.”* (Rev 2:19)

Jesus Commends

It might surprise us what he sees. Jesus sees their love, faith, service and patient endurance. Even more he sees that they are constantly improving in each of these areas.

Jesus observes them selflessly loving those within and outside the church and that their faith was leading them to serve in a range of practical ways, even in the face of challenges. Jesus recognises that they are patiently enduring and they haven't thrown in the towel. It's actually the opposite; they are growing in love, faith, service and endurance over time.

They were the only church out of the seven churches that were acknowledged for their love.

Although we live in a very different world to the 1st century, it's worth pausing for a moment and reflecting on what Jesus might be seeing in our lives as we struggle through the uncertainties of COVID-19.

Maybe you can bring to mind the opportunities you've taken to love those close to you and the strangers you have met along the way. It's a

helpful practice to pause and recall these opportunities and reflect on what has been experienced and learnt.

Maybe your story during this time has been one of faithful service and patient endurance. Thank Jesus for the privilege of being able to serve alongside him.

Take a moment to praise him for the progress being made in love, faith, service and patient endurance.

Jesus Criticises

Jesus then brings a serious complaint against the church community for tolerating false worship, eating food offered to idols and sexual misconduct.

Revelation 2:20-23:20 "But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray. She teaches them to commit sexual sin and to eat food offered to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she does not want to turn away from her immorality. 22 Therefore, I will throw her on a bed of suffering, and those who commit adultery with her will suffer greatly unless they repent and turn away from her evil deeds. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches out the thoughts and intentions of every person. And I will give to each of you whatever you deserve."

So who is Jezebel?

We are told she is a prophet who is leading Christians away from Jesus by teaching them to engage in sexual misconduct and eat food that's been offered to idols. You might be asking, was Jezebel her real name given the code and apocalyptic language being used in the letter?

We can't be completely sure but it would appear to be code likening her to the Jezebel who married King Ahab. King Ahab ruled over Israel for 22 years, marrying the Phoenician princess, Jezebel. He was described as doing evil in the Lord's sight, even more than any other king before him.

1 Kings 16:29-33:29 "Ahab son of Omri began to rule over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of King Asa's reign in Judah. He reigned in Samaria twenty-two years. 30 But Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the Lord's sight, even more than any of the kings before him. 31 And as though it were not enough to follow the sinful example of Jeroboam, he married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and he began to bow down in worship of Baal. 32 First Ahab built a temple and an altar for Baal in Samaria. 33 Then he set up an Asherah pole. He did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than any of the other kings of Israel before him."

Jezebel persuaded King Ahab to bow down and worship Baal. Ahab built a temple and altar for Baal in Samaria and set up Asherah poles across the land.

Jezebel conspired to have Naboth murdered so his vineyard could be seized. In 2 Kings 9:33 Jezebel suffered a horrendous death when Jehu demanded she be thrown out of the window, and she was subsequently stomped under the hooves of a horse and then eaten by dogs.

Importantly, Jesus gave this Jezebel time to repent. Jesus sought to get Jezebel's attention and urged her to repent and stop teaching falsehoods and to turn away from her immorality.

The giving of time is something which is repeated over and over again in the Old Testament; God gives his people time to repent or, in other words, to turn around and head back to him. The giving of time repeatedly happened before Israel was exiled to Assyria and Judah was exiled to Babylon.

After God's people had followed the practices of other nations, built shrines to false gods, offered sacrifices, worshipped idols and had done many evil things to arouse the Lord's anger he continued to call them back.

2 Kings 17:13 "Again and again the Lord had sent his prophets and seers to warn both Israel and Judah: 'Turn from all your evil ways. Obey my commands and decrees.'"

Tragically, this Jezebel and those she's influenced if they do not take up the offer to turn back, would face Jesus' judgement

22 Therefore, I will throw her on a bed of suffering, and those who commit adultery with her will suffer greatly unless they repent and turn away from her evil deeds. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches out the thoughts and intentions of every person. And I will give to each of you whatever you deserve."

You might be wondering why on earth would the church community in Thyatira have tolerated the false teaching, and for some to tragically abandon their first love to worship false gods, eat food offered to idols and engage in sexual immorality?

There could be many reasons why this occurred. The most likely reason is that they had succumbed to the cultural pressures that surrounded them. In Thyatira this could possibly be understood on three different levels:

Firstly, there was a pressure to worship the Roman emperor as a living deity, which probably arose out of Pergamum. In the first Century, there was also pressure to worship the Roman gods and engage in cult worship in the local temples. In the letter to the Pergamum church Jesus had reprimanded them for adhering to the teaching of Balaam. This adherence to cultic worship was seen as a way of demonstrating allegiance to the Roman government.

Secondly, when a man turned 18 in Roman culture they were given the 'toga of manhood' where there was an expectation to recline, eat, drink and then engage in sexual acts. In part this is what Paul addressed in the letter to the Corinthians.

Thirdly, belonging to a guild which was compulsory also brought with it an expectation that the Christian would attend guild meetings, often held in a local temple, where food offered to idols would be eaten and then acts of sexual immorality would take place after the meal. It is conceivable that to secure employment there was pressure to embrace the guild's practices.

Then how shall we live?

It's easy for us to look on with moral horror but we face our own challenges and pressures. It's helpful to pause and ask ourselves what might be the things that our church community is currently tolerating, and that which Jesus would deem as falsehoods?

Are we allowing injustices to take place turning a blind eye, as it's too hard and risky to speak up and challenge the status quo?

Are we harbouring bitterness, envy and mistrust?

Are we living out an empty doctrine, where claiming what is right is more important than living out the truth?

Are we reluctant to embrace truth for fear it will possibly upset others?

There are many ways we could potentially be tolerating our own Jezebel.

The challenge we face is we are called by Jesus to live in the world but not be defined by the world we live in.

The Christians in Thyatira and you and I are called to live in and deeply engage with the world God has created, and not to run away and hide but also not to allow ourselves to be defined by the world in which we live.

Jesus speaks to this very challenge during the Sermon on the Mount where he calls us to be salt that doesn't lose its saltiness and a light that is not hidden. If salt and light are effectively put to work then people will recognise and praise the Father.

Matthew 5:13-16 13 "You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. 14 You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. 15 No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."

A helpful analogy might be that of walking a tightrope strung over a very large drop. We are called by God to faithfully walk the tightrope of life with love and service and not to shrink and hide our light and lose our saltiness.

Jesus Crowns

For those who manage to faithfully lead this life to the end Jesus will give authority to them to rule over the nations.

Revelation 2:26 "To all who are victorious, who obey me to the very end, to them I will give authority over all the nations."

It reminds me of the parable Jesus told in Luke 19:11-26.

Jesus talks about three servants who were each given 10 minas, a sizable sum of money to invest when the nobleman left to be crowned king. One servant invested with an amazing tenfold return and another servant invested and returned a healthy five times return. These two servants were rewarded with greater authority each being given a number of cities to rule over. In other words, they were entrusted with greater responsibility.

The third servant literally buried the minas out of fear. They had their minas redistributed and faced a harsh reprimand.

Maybe the antidote to the challenges we inevitably face is not to flee out of fear but to embrace Jesus with love, faithfulness and service, with the goal of incrementally growing his investment over time.

Jesus concludes:

Revelation 2:29 "Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches."

