

“To the Church of Thyatira”, Jo Kadlecek-Gilbert

The plot line in this letter to Thyatira has played itself out thousands of times. You know the story: Heroes embark on a journey to do the right thing, to do good, fulfill their destiny; they have some success, feel pretty good, and then relax. They deserve a break. They let down their guard, and wham: some glitzy *thing* or offer of something better entices them. It won't be that bad, they think. I'll just give in a little, until the little becomes a lot and suddenly they're involved with all sorts of messes and conflicts. Think Hugh Jackman's character in the Greatest Showman. Or Frodo in the Lord of the Rings, whose love for the ring of power almost does him in. Or the prodigal son who spends his inheritance on prostitutes and revelry. Or current politicians who think they'll never get caught. Or if you go way back, think Adam and Eve and the serpent who tempted them with knowledge from the tree of life that wasn't that bad. You get the idea.

They set out with good intentions, serve well for a bit, do some good and then get sloppy or apathetic and before they know it, a salesman in the form of a snake comes and offers a bigger, brighter, better . . . whatever.

That's the picture we have in Thyatira, a hard but relevant letter for us in the perceived “paradise” of Noosa/Peregian Spring. Why is it so relevant? Because this is a letter about discerning God's best and what happens when we don't, when we tolerate messages that run counter to God's word, and compromise our relationship with Him.

So please keep your Bibles open to chapter 2:18-29 as we look at our usual points for studying these letters. **First**, Jesus, the Authority behind the letter.

2. The good in the church.
3. The church's failures,
4. The call to action.
5. The encouragement He Offers.

First, this is a message from the Son of God to the Church in Thyatira. What's the context? Thyatira was a small town about forty miles from Pergamos and established by Alexander the Great. It was the hometown of Lydia, “the seller of purple” spoken of in **Acts 16**. Lydia was

doing business when she heard Paul and Silas preach the Gospel for the first time. Some believe she helped start the church in Thyatira, even though Paul and Silas ended up in jail because of it! Entrepreneurs like Lydia made Thyatira a prosperous town, close to lots of busy roads. It was also full of trade-guilds and sports associations, kind of like unions. But these involved cultic worship to Greek and Roman gods. In fact, citizens were expected to be members of such associations, so Christians faced enormous pressure to worship these false gods for economic gain.

That's why the message sent to this church is from "the Son of God." Usually Jesus is referred to as the "Son of Man" in Revelation. But here "Son of God" is used, establishing his authority and sovereignty over all other 'gods'. He's jealous for his people and will not share his glory with another. Remember it's a letter about discernment—and discernment means to 'decide between truth & error, to choose wisely and to make careful distinctions in our thinking. To judge well.' God wants us to choose well.

So it's no accident we get the description in v 18 that his 'eyes are like blazing fire'. Fiery eyes search hearts and minds and that's behind the call to discern. This is, after all, the *same* Jesus who cut Pharisees and Saducees to the quick, who stopped a storm with a word so his disciples wouldn't be afraid, who knew a paralysed man or a bleeding woman or a desperate widow would believe and trust him when he saw their hearts and said, "Your faith has healed you; go in peace". Not that their faith was strong in itself, but the OBJECT of it was. So this Jesus, present at Creation, the 2nd person of the Trinity, the Maker of our Hearts whose feet could crush any enemy who tried to lead his people astray, this is the Son of God, the Word Made Flesh, our Ultimate Judge and Wisdom.

His authority established, what good has the church of Thyatira done? V. 19: "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance and that you are now doing more than you did at first." I know how you go and sit with the lonely, how you meet with friends from church to pray together. I know how every Sunday you help with communion or children, put out morning tea, or how you teach RI, support chaplains and missionaries. I know, says the Lord, that you are enduring patiently when your spouse doesn't come with you to church and how you're

forever looking for ways to encourage your children and grand children and neighbours to know Jesus, to reconnect with the God of love and his church. All these beautiful works, the Lord sees, as he does with this church at Thyatira. Good *is* happening. God *is* being honoured. The Gospel *is* being lived. And for that we take heart and rejoice at the privilege we have as God's people.

Yet, there's more to the picture. With even the best intentions the church of Thyatira dropped its guard. It tolerated, see v 20, a false teacher known as Jezebel, a 'prophetess' puffed up in power, who seduced God's servants to practice sexual immorality and eat food offered to idols. Who was Jezebel? The OT book of 1Kings 16 tells us Jezebel of Tyre married Israel's king Ahab and forced Baal-worship on the northern kingdom? *This* Jezebel in Thyatira is not her but is *like* her, one who intentionally led the people astray.

In other words, they might have been a church strong in works and love but they lacked discernment and tolerated heresy. They gave in to other offers. They compromised the Truth. They listened as Jezebel deceived and enticed people away from God's best. She symbolises, according to one commentary, "the prostitute Babylon who seduced through *pleasure and luxury* as well as ruthless violence."

And here's where our letter has some hard things to say to us in Noosa/Peregian Springs— We live smack in the middle of a culture that revels in just about everything but Jesus. We're surrounded by a collective mindset that says this bigger house will be nicer, that longer cruise will be worth it, this retirement plan or private school or Probus event or Nippers class will make our lives better, richer, more comfortable. Certainly, these *can* be gifts if we hold them loosely. It's when they compete with our allegiance to our Dear Lord Jesus that we invite trouble. That's when we need discernment to choose wisely. The minute we look away from the One who searches minds and hearts, thinking these other things, these earthly idols, will satisfy us or increase our status or give us meaning, that's when we're tolerating Jezebel, compromising Christ's call.

When people find out I work for a church in Noosa, they say, Wow. That must be great, so cushy and gorgeous. But I say actually, it can be hard, because there's so much to compete with. It can be hard to grow authentic Christian community through Connect groups or other gatherings because a better offer might come along. I sometimes worry that our decisions, mine included, are often more about *us and our own comfortableness* than they are about Jesus and His Kingdom. Maybe we'd rather not wrestle with what the Bible says about wealth and humility because it's just easier not to. Or maybe we think our minister is the only one who needs to study the Word or imagine new opportunities for our church to serve our community—when we're *all* called to ministry. Or do we tolerate the Jezebels of the Sunshine Coast because we compartmentalise our lifestyles and our faith? RSL meetings or book clubs over here; music lessons or sporting events here. Work here. Life with Jesus over here. On Sundays.

But the Son of God is Lord over all of them. The Gospel brings them all together. What if we saw each part of our lives as a whole, as amazing opportunities God has given us to love others with the same love we have received from the Son of God? It's no accident we live in this gorgeous place—what if we imagined new ways to introduce people to God's Kingdom *here*?!

The OT story of Daniel helps us here. How easy it would have been for Daniel and his friends to conform to the lifestyle of King Nebuchadnezzar's palace? Instead they showed great discipline in their study, diets, and overall attention to godly character. How? They turned to the Living God! He empowered them. He encouraged them. He filled them so that other things didn't even compare. They weren't tempted to abandon their faith for the riches and power of life in "palace paradise". God was their whole life, with them even in the Lion's Den and the Fiery furnace, and gave them understanding about how to make life better for everyone!

So how could we, could the church of Thyatira, move forward?? What action plan does the Author of life give to combat the sales pitches of every Jezebel? As always, the God of Kindness and grace provides a way out, even for the false prophetess herself. See v. 21: "I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling". The temporary pleasures were too much for her to give up, her heart too hard to enjoy a far better way of life, Loving the One True God. And her stubbornness ruined not just her, but her children.

It does not end well for those who compromise and fail to repent. In the process, though, v 23, “all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds and will repay each according to your deeds.”

God’s word is clear: Those who commit spiritual adultery with her will join her “on a bed of suffering.” But this is not a doom and gloom proclamation. No, repentance is an intimate offer of grace from God. He says, “Son, Daughter, please. Turn away from all that deceives you and turn to me. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.” God wants you with him. He desires all be saved to enjoy him forever!

And v24, “to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold to this false teaching and have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan”, that is the counterfeit “wisdom” of our culture, the lies, materialism and idolatry, to you, I say, “I do not lay on any other burden”. v 25. “Except hold on to what you have until I come.” Hold on!

During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the US, many white “Christians” were members of the Ku Klux Klan; they were Jezebels in their local churches, many elders, using the Bible to justify their horrifying racism. In response, African Americans took up the old folk song, *Eyes on the Prize* as their marching anthem. They sang it any time the “Christian” KKK beat them, or whenever white police officers turned excruciating water hoses on them or sicked the dogs on them, or jailed them for breaking the “laws” of segregation.

You know what they sang? “Paul and Silas thought they was lost, Dungeon shook and the chains come off, keep your eyes on the prize hold on. I got my hand on the gospel plow, won't take nothing for my journey now, keep your eyes on the prize hold on.”

To the church of Thyatira? V. 26: “To him who *holds on*, who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations just as I have received authority from my father”. To co-shepherd with me, as some translate it. We’ll receive even as Jesus himself has received authority. Then, he makes this final beautiful promise that surpasses anything we’ll ever know

on earth in this lifetime: “And I will give him the morning star.” The morning star symbolises more beauty than any *thing* money could buy, more comfort and love and grace than any lifestyle this world offers. How do we know? Because He’s already done it! He’s already trustworthy, having secured our eternal home through the *sacrificial death* of the Son of God, on the cross for us. He has already risen from the grave as the morning star to offer new life! That hope, that reality, makes anything in this ‘paradise of Noosa/Peregian Springs’ pale in comparison. I love how the Apostle Paul put it in his first letter to Timothy, chapter 6, just after he warned him to be careful of false teachers and the illusion of wealth:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

So dear friends. Don’t be deceived. Keep yourself from idols. Be rich in good deeds. And keep your eyes on the prize, Jesus, the Son of God. Hold on.