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**Letters to the Churches IV: Thyatira – Revelation 2:18-29**

Notes on the lesson: Thyatira was a major city of commerce for about five hundred years – from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. It was famous for, among other things, purple cloth, a costly item, reserved only for nobility.

Thyatira also appears in the Book of Acts, chapter 16: Lydia, a wealthy gentile dealer in purple cloth from that city, is converted by Paul, and makes her house in Philippi available to Paul and his companion, Silas.

Lesson.

This is a whole lot more exciting to modern ears than some of the other messages – this one is juicy, with a Jezebel and everything!

I've heard a person called a Jezebel – have you? What is a Jezebel? Well, the dictionary says that it's "an offensive term for a woman regarded as sexually immoral or manipulative." (Encarta) The name gets its bad reputation from the wife of King Ahab of Israel, who came from Phoenicia, and is renowned for bringing to Israel the pagan religion of

her people – and for the Israelite prophets’ opposition to her, especially the great prophet Elijah. This reference is what will pull all this together for the little church, since all they had were the Hebrew Scriptures – our Bible came much later.

It’s after God destroys Jezebel’s pet prophets at the hands of Elijah that he flees to the mountain and hears the famous “still, small voice” of God. Jezebel was famous, too, for her ruthless tactics to further her husband, King Ahab’s, cause. She was NOT a nice lady, especially if she didn’t like you!

So. The message to the angel, the spirit, of the church in Thyatira is two-fold: one, those of you who are doing well are doing extremely well for Christ. They started strong and just keep getting stronger. But in this hotbed of worship of the Greek gods Apollo and Helios that was Thyatira, under the pressure and manipulation of this unknown person, here called Jezebel, some are headed far, far astray into, like Pergamum, easy, attractive sins to slip into, because they seem pleasant, even fun at the time. Which, let’s face it, is the most effective form of manipulation: make something bad look really inviting. Think of that supremely ugly Angler Fish, the one that has a little light dangling just inside the reach of his ferocious jaws: that light looks so attractive to other fish that they swim right into a nasty death.

Wouldn't have been hard to find slippery sin there in Thyatira. They were already used to the worship of Apollo and Helios. The religion of the city of Thyatira was a cult of the sun.

That's why the risen Christ describes himself the way he does, to help them understand that *he* understands *them*. In each of these letters, he identifies himself in terms that are unique and tailored to the people of that city: Ephesus, as “the one with the seven stars in his right hand, moving among the seven lampstands” – light to what was known as the church of light. To Smyrna, as the One who rose from dead, as they will suffer and rise; to Pergamum, Christ is the one with a two-edged sword in his mouth, ready to cut through the sin and misleading teachings around them.

To Thyatira, the Triumphant Christ identifies himself as God's S-O-N Son, with blazing eyes and shining feet – outdoing both Apollo and Helios, the s-u-n. “Don't be taken in by these false gods!” his words say. “I am the One, the true Son of God.” And one whose eyes and feet are more radiant than the sun that shines down on our desert.

There are many who have heard Christ's message and are living it out, growing in faith and in deed every day. But there are many who've been manipulated and deceived by this Jezebel. And that's something that is so true wherever we look around us today, isn't it?

Interestingly, another thing that comes out of the ancient commentaries we've been using to help understand Revelation for today is that sexual immorality and prostitution are often interpreted as spiritual, not just physical. Many of the ancient religions used what's called "ritual prostitution" in their worship practices, and Jezebel – both the original and the one here in Thyatira – have wormed their way into the faithful, leading some of them into both immoral practices and beliefs.

Wasn't the first time, isn't the last. And it helps us identify with them: we, like that little crowd of Christ-followers in an exciting pagan city, are under both blatant and subtle attack. And remember, they didn't have a Bible or centuries of tradition and winnowing out of heresy to depend on: they were on their own, along with the Spirit, and their church's spirit.

But my favorite part of this passage comes nearly at the end: those who remain faithful, who do not hear the siren song of Jezebel, will find a very special reward. Like the white stone of Pergamum, these followers of the light in a city that worshiped the sun are promised something beautiful: the morning star, which we usually think of as Christ (he's given the title "The Bright Morning Star" in Revelation 22:16), but for them was a symbol of the resurrection.

Some time ago, I was called to comfort – well, be with – a grieving widow quite shortly after her husband’s death. Let me tell you it was a very special time: he was lying, dead, in his bed, on his back, the hospital bed tilted up so that he was nearly sitting. His faithful dog was in his lap, looking the way only a dog can look when it knows there’s nothing it can do but love and hurt for its master.

We prayed a bit, me rubbing the dog’s neck and holding the new widow’s hand. Then she told me the most amazing thing: “This morning, when I came in to see him, he was looking out at the early dawn, at the morning star, hanging there like a jewel in the sky. And he had this incredible grin on his face – sort of like when he’d put one over on someone, in a funny way, of course; a good joke.

“And then he died.”

So, what have we learned from the message to the angel of Thyatira this morning? Well, once again, that we are not alone in fighting a very beguiling world of sin and death; they fought it too, and others to come will as well. The risen Christ promised them that those who held fast would conquer, that those who fell into spiritual and moral depravity would not. But the greatest gift of all is the gift of the morning star – which the ancient writers says is the gift of the resurrection. For that is what that gentleman who’d died with the

morning star in his eyes saw, and in some hard-to-explain way, that is what he knew was coming: the new life in Christ.

May the morning star rise for you, and may you conquer all your tiny – and tremendous – temptations; may you wear the purple of divine royalty, and glow brighter than the sun.