

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Thyatira: God's certain and Discerning Judgment

Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. (Revelation 2:20–23, KJV 1900)

I have a few things against thee.... If we were to classify Bible verses in the category of "Understated," this verse would surely stand near the top of the list. In a culture that increasingly divides itself between people who carefully avoid any form of self-judgment and think themselves to be God's personal gift to humanity and people who look for reasons to load themselves with guilt for no good reason, this lesson gives us a timely reminder of a Biblical truth. For the arrogant who think they have no faults, God's piercing eyes see the thoughts and intents of their hearts, saying, "...I have a few things against thee." For the folks who look for guilt to heap onto themselves, this passage serves as a powerful reminder that God doesn't deal with vague, shadowy convictions. When He has a problem with something we do, He convicts us and reminds us of the sin in our life. In the case of the Thyatira Church, the Lord didn't tell the church that He had a few things against her, but she would have to guess what they were. He immediately told her.

Commentaries waste a lot of ink debating whether this wicked woman was really named Jezebel, or if she is referred to by this name because of her profound wickedness. Does it really matter what her name was? Her conduct was the problem.

Some commentaries also link this wicked woman to the trade guilds that abounded in Thyatira, almost like current unions who enforce a "Closed shop." No one could trade in Thyatira unless they belonged to the guilds. History affirms that the guilds encouraged base sinful conduct and the worship of the city's favorite pagan idols. Again, the background doesn't change the moral blackness of this woman's conduct and influence on some of the weaker members of this church.

...because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel.... The presence of the word "sufferest" is interesting. The church was not actively sponsoring this wicked woman and her sinful actions. The church's mere tolerance of the situation is the point the Lord warns the church to change. Occasionally, perhaps well-

meaning and naïve people will claim that the New Testament says next to nothing about how a church should conduct herself, so, according to their reasoning, a church is pretty much free within very wide boundaries to do whatever she wishes. On the rare occasions when people have made this point to me, at times even preachers who gave the appearance of being well studied, I always have the urge to ask what Bible they read. Peter charges the wicked with willful blindness regarding the Lord's promise of His Second Coming. (2 Peter 3:5) People who claim to live by faith and to believe the Bible should not try to imitate the wicked, consciously closing their eyes and minds to things in Scripture that they prefer not to accept. We teasingly laugh at the anecdote about the man who loudly said that he could find nothing in his Bible regarding the doctrine of election, because he had taken his scissors and carefully cut out all the passages that mentioned the doctrine. Does it matter whether someone applies the scissors of human pride to the Bible or they simply close their eyes and pretend the Bible says nothing about a theme that they have already chosen to reject, despite the Bible's clear teachings on the point? One practice is as foolish as the other. We should consider this verse as a grave warning to all of us and to all of our churches. Not only does the Lord hold us responsible to Him for what we actively do, but **He also shall bring us before His judgment seat for what we tolerate.**

No doubt the attitude and lifestyle of this woman was similar to the Old Testament woman by the same name. Jezebel actively worked to eliminate all true worship of God in the Northern Kingdom, and to replace it with Baal worship. The reign of Ahab and Jezebel in the Northern Kingdom is one of the darkest chapters in the Old Testament's history of God's people and of their conscious rebellion from Him and from His commandments. Despite the depraved depth of sin that Jezebel promoted, the Lord sent Elijah and several other prophets to the Northern Kingdom during this era, all of them warning the people of their sins and

calling them to repent and to return to the Lord. On one occasion when Ahab and Elijah met in a remote area, Ahab uttered the most amazing and revealing words to Elijah, "And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, *Art thou he that troubleth Israel?*" (1 Kings 18:17 KJV) Ahab and Jezebel have effectively destroyed Israel by their wicked idolatry, but their view of things is the mirror opposite of God's. In their eyes, the only "Trouble-maker" around was Elijah, the man of God. People who have given themselves over to sin hold similar attitudes toward anyone who in any way reminds them of their sins. Such a person in their eyes is a "Trouble-maker." Elijah refused to "Suffer" Ahab, Jezebel, or Baal-worship in Israel. Under God's commandment and power, Elijah actively created as much trouble for Ahab and Jezebel as he could, and the Lord blessed his work.

...which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to^d commit fornication, and^d to eat things sacrificed unto idols. "Sister" Jezebel led a two-pronged attack against the church. Under the false claim of being a prophetess and telling the people what God had "revealed" to her, she taught the people that it was perfectly acceptable for them to commit sexual sin and to worship pagan idols. It was the sinful, seducing woman who spoke similar enticing words to the naïve young man, *"I have peace offerings with me; this day have I payed my vows."* (Proverbs 7:14 KJV) Sometimes the blackest of sins and sinful people hide under the banner of pretended godliness. Why would they bother to do so? The context in Proverbs 7 affirms the same points that we see in our study passage. The Jezebel of Thyatira seduced godly servants in the church. To seduce indicates that she used false pretenses to mislead, to actively influence others to err, by causing them to form wrong judgments about what was right and wrong. This wicked woman obviously was quite convincing and blinding in her sinful work, but she did not for a moment deceive the Lord.

And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. How amazing is God's kindness! Even this evil woman was warned and nudged to repent, but she apparently refused. Occasionally well-meaning Christians will debate whether believers can commit a sin from which they cannot repent and for which they cannot be forgiven, either by the Lord or by godly people. This single verse settles the question. I cannot imagine a blacker sin, but the Lord specifically says that He gave even Jezebel space to repent.

Is God so laid-back and indifferent that He doesn't really care too much whether His children obey Him or not? Is His chastening so mild that His erring child barely realizes that the Lord disapproves of his sins? My first response is

simple. What seducing demonic spirit would suggest such a thing to anyone? My second response comes directly from the Lord's words to this teetering church.

Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

The same Lord who is incredibly merciful and forgiving to His repenting children is unapologetically severe, but wholly righteous, in His judgments against His stubbornly sinful and unrepentant children. Both Jezebel, the seducer, and those who closed their eyes and joined her in her sins, the seduced, face similar judgment. And the judgment described is not mild. The passage describes it as "...great tribulation..." and "...death..."

...and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. When the Lord steps into a situation to judge, He makes His presence and judgment clearly known. Notice where this judgment begins, "...searcheth the reins and hearts." Think in terms of ancient agriculture and commerce. Donkey's, oxen, or perhaps horses, were harnessed to the burden. Their master directed their actions by words and by the reins tied to the animal and held in his hands. The animal's movements were not irresistibly coerced. If that were the case, the analogy would not fit the present lesson and warning at all. However, the master could clearly communicate his desired actions to the animal by means of both voice and the reins that he held in his hands. The animal could obey and move the burden according to the master's wishes, or he could refuse and face the master's disapproval.

...I will give unto every one of you according to your works. The Lord doesn't play the role of a cosmic puppeteer, moving people around and either blessing or cursing them based on His cosmic puppet strings or whim of the moment. He established His universe on a moral basis, and He commands His people to obey His moral commandments. His blessings or His chastening results from our personal moral choices. Likewise, His blessings on a church or His chastening of a church occurs "...according to your works." If you have fallen into careless or even stubborn sin, this lesson gives you a powerful motive to repent and to find the healing grace of the Lord's blessings. As He gave "Sister" Jezebel space to repent, He likewise gives you space to repent. Eventually, even His longsuffering comes to an end, and judgment, severe, but altogether righteous judgment follows. ***Which shall you chose?***

^d See ver. 14.

^e Comp. Ex. 34. 15?

^d See ver. 14.

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