

## **CHRIST Speaks to Churches**

Letters to the Seven Churches of Revelation 1-3

by Theodore H. Epp

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### **CHAPTER FIVE**

#### **CHRIST SPEAKS TO THYATIRA**

**"And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. 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 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 everyone of you according to your works. But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Revelation 2:18-29).**

How little most of us seem to realize Who it is that speaks to us in these letters! Men in general are listening less and less to what GOD has to say.

At this very time there is a controversy among the nations of the earth as to who speaks with authority. The free world looks to America to speak for them. This is contested by Russia who would like to speak for all the world. But all of us need to listen to CHRIST. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He began all things and He will bring all things to their consummation. His word is final, and men should learn to serve Him with fear and trembling.

In the passage before us CHRIST is described as having eyes like a flame of fire. He has absolute and intimate knowledge of all our hearts. He knows the profoundest secrets among us. There is nothing hidden from Him, our faults, our motives, or anything else about us.

We can take comfort in this, for He will give proper recognition to all who faithfully serve Him. Full recognition does not come to us necessarily in this world; and in many cases none at all is given in this world to many of GOD's servants. But GOD knows these things, and keeps a record of all our heart's devotion and service to Him. One day He will reward us for our faithfulness.

His feet, we are told, are like fine brass; this speaks to us of coming judgment. For some conditions there is no remedy save judgment. Apostasy, for example, which is a deliberate denying of and falling away from the truth, ends only in judgment. Those referred to in Romans chapter one who **"hold [down] the truth in unrighteousness"** will be judged. In Hebrews we learn that **"if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries"** (Hebrews 10:26, 27).

In the Book of the Revelation CHRIST is revealed as the One who brings judgment. Yet how lightly men treat this matter. There is **"no fear of God before their eyes."** And this irreverence toward GOD even characterizes many Christians.

We dare not overlook the spiritual law expressed in the sixth chapter of Galatians where we learn that GOD is not mocked, that **"whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."** If men sow to the flesh, they will reap of the flesh; if they sow to the Spirit, they will reap of the Spirit. The final evaluation of whether we have served in the flesh or in the Spirit lies with GOD, and we will be rewarded or lose rewards accordingly.

GOD knows our works as this passage in the Book of the Revelation shows. Nothing is overlooked. This is given us by way of encouragement to preserve in meekness and humility in service for Him. GOD is righteous and will not overlook the good in the things that we do. He will commend us for even the small things we have done right.

If men, on the other hand, see one or two things being done wrong by someone, they are inclined to condemn the man's whole life. This is a sad state of affairs. We see a man whom GOD may be using, and he makes a mistake perhaps only of judgment, but right away many of his fellow believers condemn and repudiate him. Because he errs in one phase of his life, they seem to think that nothing he does counts for GOD.

Paul had to face this difficulty with the Corinthian believers. He acknowledged himself to be a mere man and liable to error and sin, and rested his case in GOD's hands. He knew that one day GOD will bring to light all the secret things of men's hearts and show outward actions in their true light.

In judging Sodom, GOD did not overlook the fact that Lot and members of his household needed to be saved from the destruction about to fall upon the cities of the plains. And though there were hundreds of thousands of people, possibly millions, who were unrighteous, ungodly, and unholy before the flood, GOD did not forget the one man and his family who, in spite of their environment, pleased GOD with their lives.

Judas, who denied and betrayed the Lord JESUS CHRIST, was given room to repent. He even brought back the betrayal money and cast it at the feet of the priests. I am sure in my own mind that the Lord would have forgiven Judas if he had come with a repentant heart. He was filled with remorse for his evil deed, but apparently he did not seek the forgiveness GOD would gladly have provided.

## Thyatira's Love

Thyatira had, at least, a measure of love for the Lord. The word translated "**charity**" means love. Thyatira had what Ephesus had left. Here was a church that was serving CHRIST out of a love for Him, possibly having heeded the warning given to the Ephesian church.

Faithfulness also characterized this group. They were diligent in service and did not hesitate to give a cup of cold water in the Saviour's name. Some people are ready to spread a large banquet feast but slow to do the smaller things that really indicate their love for CHRIST. It is sometimes easier to preach to a crowd than it is to minister to an individual soul.

The emphasis today among us is on the large crowds and the showy programs. But GOD sees the little things and gives commendation accordingly. The church at Thyatira, had been laboring for the Lord a long time. They had not left their first love; but rather, that love was growing and increasing as the days went by. So should it be with us in our service. We should not be satisfied with what we did for the Lord yesterday, but seek today to be faithful and, if possible, do an even better job. We should work and walk and live with the Lord and grow in the knowledge of Him continuously and consistently.

However, the church at Thyatira was not faultless. It had settled down in the world, and in settling down in the world, it settled down in sin. The spiritual condition of Thyatira reminds us of the parable our Saviour spoke concerning the woman who put leaven in the meal. There was sin in this church. The current attitude of the world and the atmosphere in church circles today is for all of us to be tolerant toward sin. But this must never be allowed, for if we allow a little leaven to enter in, it will leaven the whole lump. We who are GOD's people must be constantly on the alert against the coming in of evil. Soon it will permeate the whole, causing disunity and making our service ineffective.

## The Woman Jezebel

The believers in Thyatira also permitted a prophetess by the name of Jezebel to flourish in their midst and to teach and lead GOD's people astray. This evil woman introduced idolatry which GOD called "**fornication**," evidently spiritual fornication, and so He said, "**I will cast her in 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.**" These are strong words, yet they were spoken to an organized church. There were unbelievers in the midst, certainly, Jezebel was one; yet the Christians allowed her, without protest on their part, to teach her wicked doctrines.

We see a similar attitude in many churches today. We are cautioned to be more "tolerant" towards people who do not see eye to eye with us. Evidently "love" to such persons means tolerance of sin. It is true that GOD has never endorsed nor advocated persecution of those who do not hold to the true faith.

Those who take up the sword, our Lord tells us, will die by the sword. On the other hand He has made it very clear that Christians are not to allow false teachers into the fellowship of the

churches. Moreover, compromising with the world will not win the world. The people in the world are so disillusioned with the compromises they see among their own crowd that they have no respect for a Christian who would compromise his vital message in an effort to win those opposed to him.

Still, it is a common thing to see membership drives in churches geared to multiply members but not members who are born again. The New Testament teaches that those who are saved should associate themselves with Bible-believing churches. In that way believers can unite in service and worship together; but we go against the directions of the Lord when we take unbelievers into our midst and hope thereby that we can reach them for CHRIST. Almost invariably they will do as Jezebel did and corrupt our fellowships.

The instructions in the Word of GOD are very explicit. We read, "**Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers . . . Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you**" (II Corinthians 6:14-17).

### **The Historic Jezebel**

For a comprehensive picture of Jezebel's character and conduct and her violent end read from I Kings 16:28 through to the end of the book and then the latter part of the ninth chapter of II Kings. Jezebel, we find, was an idolater, a follower of the false god Baal. She made a twofold attack upon the spiritual leaders of the true GOD in Israel. She first of all tried to get them to compromise their testimony. Then, those she could not persuade to compromise their faith, she persecuted to the death.

Now, in Ahab's household was one named Obadiah who had the responsibility of taking care of Ahab's personal business affairs. Obadiah was a man who "**feared the Lord greatly,**" and when Jezebel was seeking to kill GOD's prophets, Obadiah saved a hundred of them "**and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water**" (I Kings 18:4). From this we learn that Jezebel was not entirely successful in stamping out the worship of the true GOD. Nevertheless, all through Israel at this time, idolatry flourished, and all because of the evil mixture of religions introduced by Jezebel.

It is not hard to see a similar condition in our churches today. So many church groups feel that they must make their program attractive to the world by compromising with worldly standards. The great emphasis in the world is on entertainment; consequently, many churches have tried to put on a program that will entertain rather than convict of sin and lead people to CHRIST and establish them in the faith.

The world is far better able to provide the kind of entertainment worldly people want. The church, when it seeks to compete with the world on this plane, is entirely out of place and unable to produce. It is not wrong for Christians to have a certain amount of entertainment depending on what is meant by entertainment. If it is simply a matter of killing time, as people say, the Christian has no time to kill. Every time we kill time we are killing souls. We are not taking steps to arrest their downward journey. It is sad to think that once again the program Jezebel inaugurated so many years ago is finding success in the midst of GOD's people today.

She also corrupted government and used it to uphold her false teaching. However, it is the part of poetic justice that it was finally government that got rid of her because of the corruptions she introduced into the life of Israel. She was given "**space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.**"

A very startling fact is that many false religions of the present day were begun by women. This is no indictment of women, for without godly women the work of GOD would be greatly hindered. In many mission fields there are five women missionaries for every man missionary. And in our own country there are more women who attend church than men. At the same time many of the false religions of the present day have been originated by women who have gone off into "special revelations." We need to be careful of those who come to us with special helps, special keys, new discoveries, and new hidden philosophies which are not the deep things of GOD but the deep things of Satan.

### **The church and Christians today need to get back to what the Bible teaches**

One of the greatest enemies of the gospel, however, is higher criticism, which was originated by men, not some woman. Higher criticism has rejected the miracles of the Word, always having some plausible explanation for them that appeals to unbelieving hearts.

In a small church in Oklahoma near to where I was reared there came a preacher who was ensnared in Modernism. He wanted to pass along his "new learning" to the congregation not knowing that the particular group he was speaking to had many Bible believers in it.

One day in seeking to explain away the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, he stated that CHRIST was such a dynamic teacher and personality that the people sat and listened to Him for hours without realizing the passage of time and the fact that they were hungry. He so fed them with intellectual and spiritual food that they did not need any physical food.

When this preacher was through giving this explanation a little girl, six or seven years of age, stood up and said, "Pastor, I'd like to ask you a question. If that's the way JESUS fed those people, where did He get the twelve baskets full that were left over?" It took a little girl to show the absurdity of the teaching of the higher critics.

But this is common today, this matter of seeking to explain the Bible on a purely human level. Men overlook the fact that spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Biblical things are biblically discerned. It is only as the Spirit of GOD illumines our hearts that we can understand the things of GOD. Men by nature cannot understand the infinite and the eternal. Who could explain that GOD never had a beginning and never will have an end? We have a beginning, but we will never have an end. We will either spend eternity in hell or in heaven. That depends upon the preparation and choice we make concerning CHRIST here upon this earth.

We must examine ourselves to see if we are giving our money and our time to organizations and enterprises that are compromising the truth of GOD, instead of declaring fully the whole counsel of GOD. We will find that this mixture of Christianity and the world with its human philosophies is not pleasing to GOD. We must turn back to CHRIST and His truth.

## Whose Yoke Do We Wear?

The word "**yoke**" in II Corinthians 6 is sometimes misunderstood. The Lord does not intend us to become hermits and withdraw ourselves from other people even though we are to be separate in our fellowship from the world and from unbelievers. Instead, we are to take Christ's yoke upon us and go back into the harvest fields to reach the unsaved with the gospel.

A yoke signifies the binding of ourselves with someone or something. If it is the wrong person or the wrong program, then we are unequally yoked. For a Christian man to seek an unbeliever as his wife or a Christian woman to seek an unbeliever as her husband, is to be unequally yoked. For a Christian to seek a partner in business who is an unbeliever, will spell trouble for both of them. The same is true with regard to church relationships. If a Bible-believing Christian joins himself to an unbelieving church that would create an unequal yoke. In any of these cases the Christian would be putting himself under obligation to do things against his own conscience and faith; and, which would be equally bad, he would not be able to do things that he knows he ought to do.

Over against this unequal yoke we are invited to take Christ's yoke upon us. It is an easy yoke, as He said. In this yoke with CHRIST, we do not do the things the flesh wants but the things the HOLY SPIRIT wants. We are yoked together with CHRIST and He as our Head directs us and tells us what to do and where to go. Just as my hand is part of my body and cannot act independently of the rest of the body, particularly of the head, just so is the Christian yoked to CHRIST under the direction of CHRIST.

In the unequal yoke, one will pull one way and one the other. This will result in compromise or in frustration or both; but in the end it would mean that GOD would be the real loser. Righteousness has no fellowship with unrighteousness. Light has no place of compromise with darkness. It is no wonder, then, that we read: "**Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God**" (II Corinthians 6:17-7:1).

We are in the world but we are not to be of the world. When our Saviour was here upon the earth He ate with sinners. He even ate with some of the Pharisees who were the Modernists of that day. There are many Christian circles today where our Lord would be criticized for doing what He did; but we must remember that in none of these actions did He yoke Himself or compromise His message with unbelievers.

We can see the same truth in the case of Elijah. He called upon Ahab to bring the people of Israel together to Mount Carmel to find out just who the true GOD really was. Elijah was yoked to GOD, not to Ahab, in this contest. Ahab was a means to an end, for it was through him that a crowd was gathered. Elijah was responsible for the spiritual lesson. Remember that in all of these matters GOD ponders the motives of the heart, and sometimes what may seem like a compromising yoke on the part of some servant of GOD may be no yoke at all but simply a legitimate method of reaching certain ones for CHRIST.

## Judgment on Jezebel

A severe judgment was declared against Jezebel. The Lord said, "**Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds.**" When people are asleep on a bed they are unconscious of the things around them. They are relaxed and unconcerned about the course of events. In the light of this context such false teachers and leaders will be in a kind of spiritual sluggishness and will not only deceive others but will be deceived themselves. The record is that "**evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived**" (II Timothy 3:13).

Those who commit adultery with Jezebel are to be cast into great tribulation except they repent. These, without doubt, are the unregenerate. Over against this is the promise in the third chapter of Revelation to believers: "**Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation** (great tribulation), **which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth**" (v. 10). This should help settle one of the controversies that are so rife among Bible believers of the present time. These two Scriptures tell us very plainly who will go into the tribulation and who will not. The unregenerate, those who are not born again, will be cast into tribulation. Those who are born again, according to our Saviour's own promise, will not pass through the great tribulation.

So severe will be this judgment that the unregenerate members of the organized churches will have no question about what is happening to them. GOD who searches the reins and the hearts knows the true spiritual status of every individual, and each will receive according to his or her works. This does not mean salvation by works, but believers will be rewarded according to their works, and unbelievers will suffer degrees of punishment according to their works.

However, there was a remnant in Thyatira who did not have the doctrine of Jezebel and who did not know the depths of Satan. No other burden was to be placed upon them. They are appealed to, however, to hold fast until JESUS comes.

This is a message for us today, for Thyatira's conditions are being re-enacted once more in our midst. These are times of lethargy and of coldness and of compromise. Many of GOD's people are losing out with Him, but let us determine to hold fast that which we have. GOD wants to be able to give us the crown He has planned for us. We must listen to what He says. GOD hates neutrality. He wants us to take sides - His side - and be out and out for Him.

## Spiritual Retrogression

In a number of places in the Scriptures GOD gives us a record of spiritual declension on the part of men or groups. In the case of Achan, the record of whose sin is given in Joshua 7, we learn that he first looked at the spoils, coveted them, took them, and finally hid them in the earth. Sin works in that way. First there is the appeal through the eye gate, then covetousness arises in the heart to where we take what we want. Finally, conscience smites us, and we try to cover up the evil thing we have done.

In the first Psalm we notice a progression in sin also. We find there that the blessed man is the

one who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of the sinner, and does not sit in the seat of the scornful. By telling us what the godly man does not do, we learn what the ungodly man does do; and in this progressive decline we find him first walking, then standing, and finally sitting among the unbelievers.

The ungodly man first of all discusses the wrong things, for he walks in the counsel of the ungodly. Then he begins to stand in the way of sinners, and finally he is given a permanent seat in the place of sin. This is not only a warning to unbelievers but shows what can happen in the life of a Christian who gives way to wrong desires and wrong company.

### **Retrogression in the Churches**

In these letters to the seven churches, we find that five of them were censured for evil conduct. Two of them were not.

In the case of the first, we found that it left its first love. They did not lose it but deliberately left it. The service, which was plentiful, was done as a matter of duty rather than arising out of love. The motive was wrong.

Love is a constraining power which is necessary in the cause of the Lord and is also necessary in the making of a home. It takes love on the part of the wife to cook day after day to take care of her family and her husband and keep up with the everyday chores of homemaking. Where such love is present, home life is enjoyable; and what under other circumstances might be drudgery becomes pleasure, because of the love back of it. Obedient children who find obedience a pleasure are those who have love motivating them.

When married life, however, becomes a duty because love is gone, very soon the home is in danger. And so it is in the work of the Lord. If our service springs from our daily fellowship with Him through the Word and through prayer then our service will be a joy and a delight.

To the church of Pergamos our Lord spoke against loose living. When the first love is gone, and those responsible are stubborn in their rebellion, very soon pure standards disappear and evil practices take over.

The same can be seen in a home. Where it is merely duty that calls very soon looseness of living can show itself in either the husband or the wife. They get their eyes on someone else. Where the motive is wrong in the Christian life, self creeps in and CHRIST is shut out. Then we seek for self-honor, and power for self, and self-glory, and the whole life centers around what we want and what we enjoy. With love for CHRIST gone, it is no surprise that doctrines such as the doctrine of Balaam and of the Nicolaitanes creeps in.

In the fourth church, Thyatira, we find the spirit of compromise which leads to "spiritual **for-nication**" becomes prominent. When we come to Sardis we discover the spiritual life is so deteriorated that Christianity is merely a name with the life-giving principle gone. We read, "**thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.**" Religious form and admiration of CHRIST as a good man, are substituted for the living Son of GOD, but the mystery of the gospel which Paul was given to preach to the world is completely forgotten.

The end is reached when we read of the church of Laodicea, "**I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.**" That which began with the leaving of the first love ends in active apostasy. The church that began to preach the message of life becomes the church that is opposed to the CHRIST of the Bible. It is not an anti-religious movement but an anti-Christian movement. It opposes the things of GOD and leaves CHRIST on the outside knocking, asking permission to enter.

In keeping with these progressive stages of sin leading to apostasy, we have GOD's statement of progressive judgment. To the first church the warning was given that GOD would come and remove the "**candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.**" This speaks of the removal of the work of the HOLY SPIRIT from their midst. Then follows judgment by the Word in which the Lord declares that He would come and fight against them with the sword of His mouth. The third judgment is that sinners would be cast into a bed with the false prophetess and also into great tribulation. Nevertheless, in all of this, GOD gives such persons opportunity to repent.

Then in the third chapter we are faced with this warning: "**I will come on thee as a thief.**" This is certain judgment with no further warning to be given. Finally will come absolute eternal separation from GOD. Rejection of Him when persisted in will lead to the second death.

It may be that CHRIST is outside your heart's door today knocking, asking to come in. Will you not say "Yes" to Him today? What you need is CHRIST, not religion. Let Him in.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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