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Revelation 2:18–29

*“The Problem of Idolatry” The Church in Thyatira*

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Thyatira was the smallest of the seven cities we’re studying in [Revelation 2](#) and, like the rest of the Roman Empire, was riddled with idolatry. It is mentioned only one other time in the Bible, in [Acts 16:14](#), where we read the account of Lydia,<sup>1</sup> who became Paul’s first convert to Christianity in Philippi. The city was located about 25 miles southeast of Pergamum, and was a center of trade. Thyatira was well known as the place where a special purple dye was created from the root of the madder plant. There were more commercial guilds<sup>2</sup> in the city than any other Roman province, including dyers, wool-workers, linen-workers, clothing, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, and bronze-smiths. The city today has a population of about 50,000 people and is called Akhisar.

The Lord compliments the church concerning their love, faith, service and perseverance. He sees their genuine love and the way they care about one another with words and actions. He sees that they are a faith-filled church, which trusts and believes he is working in and through them in miraculous ways. He sees the way they serve<sup>3</sup> and minister to one another in practical ways. He sees that they remained steadfast when times were tough. The Lord, however, has a major complaint against this church: they tolerate Jezebel’s influence.

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<sup>1</sup> *“One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”*

<sup>2</sup> An association of people with similar interests or pursuits; a medieval association of merchants or craftsmen. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/guild>

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word is *diakonia*. <http://www.searchgodsword.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=1248>

## Jezebel

1. The account of Jezebel's life and her wickedness is told in [1 Kings 16](#).
2. [1 Kings 16:29-33](#) - *"In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him."*
3. Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of the Sidonians, who, according to Josephus, was an occult priest.
4. In [2 Kings 9:22](#), we read that she practiced *"idolatry"* and *"witchcraft."*
5. She married King Ahab and her influence on him and the nation was profound.
6. King Ahab built temples and altars to Baal and Asherah, the male and female gods of the Sidonians and Canaanites.
  - a. These were fertility gods, and the people believe that rain and fertile crops would be theirs if they worshipped them *"on every high hill and under every spreading tree,"*<sup>4</sup> through open, flagrant, ritual sex acts.
  - b. It was for this reason that there was a severe famine, because God withheld rain for 3 ½ years to show them that their idolatry was useless to bring rain and good crops.
7. It's important to know that Jezebel's influence over Israel did not include replacing God with idolatry, but to include God with idolatry.

## Elijah And The Prophets Of Baal

8. The combination of idol worship and God worship is the whole basis behind the encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel in [1 Kings 18](#).
9. [1 Kings 18:18-21](#) - *" 'I have not made trouble for Israel,' Elijah replied. 'But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and*

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<sup>4</sup> [2 Kings 17:10](#)

*have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.' So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, 'How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.' But the people said nothing."*

10. The people were wavering between idols and God, and Elijah was saying, "You've got to make a choice!"
11. The Bible tells us that God showed up, so to speak, in a powerful way, and the result was that the people repented, the prophets of Baal were killed, and the Lord sent much-needed rain.
12. **2 Kings 9:30-37** records the account of Zezebel's death, which was prophesied in advance.<sup>5</sup>
  - a. *"Then Jehu went to Jezreel. When Jezebel heard about it, she painted her eyes, arranged her hair and looked out of a window. As Jehu entered the gate, she asked, 'Have you come in peace, Zimri, you murderer of your master?' He looked up at the window and called out, 'Who is on my side? Who?' Two or three eunuchs looked down at him. 'Throw her down!' Jehu said. So they threw her down, and some of her blood spattered the wall and the horses as they trampled her underfoot. Jehu went in and ate and drank. 'Take care of that cursed woman,' he said, 'and bury her, for she was a king's daughter.' But when they went out to bury her, they found nothing except her skull, her feet and her hands. They went back and told Jehu, who said, 'This is the word of the Lord that he spoke through his servant Elijah the Tishbite: On the plot of ground at Jezreel dogs will devour Jezebel's flesh. Jezebel's body will be like refuse on the ground in the plot at Jezreel, so that no one will be able to say, 'This is Jezebel.'"*

### Idolatry

13. The Lord's concern was that the "Jezebel Problem" was tolerated in the church of Thyatira.
14. We were made to worship, and every human being has an innate need to ascribe worth to something.

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<sup>5</sup> **2 Kings 9:10** - " 'As for Jezebel, dogs will devour her on the plot of ground at Jezreel, and no one will bury her.' "

15. God created us to ascribe that worth to him, and that's what worship is: worship.
16. Idolatry is misplaced worth; it's when other things that compete with God's worth capture a person's heart.
17. Since human beings are created to worship, the question is, "Who or what are you going to worship?"
18. Even a so-called atheist isn't really an atheist in the truest sense, because atheists worship self as king.
19. God knows all about us, which is why he put these two commandments at the top of the list!
  - a. **Exodus 20:3** - " 'You shall have no other gods before me.' "
  - b. **Exodus 20:4-5** - " 'You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...' "
20. Even though we may not have any carved idols or bow down to some false god, it's important to recognize that there is a difference between idolatry of the hand and idolatry of the heart.
21. Idolatry of the hand.
  - a. The truth is that Israel was in serious trouble!
    - i. **Isaiah 2:8** - "Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made."
  - b. In **1 John 5:21**, John the apostle gave this warning: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols."
  - c. We're just like the people in Israel, because we too, are surrounded by idols: sex, another person, money, career, drugs/alcohol, possessions, education, narcissism, etc.
  - d. Generally speaking, idols aren't bad things; just good things turned into ultimate things.
  - e. They are, however, just as real and just as consuming of our time, money and energy, and we serve them instead of God.

22. Idolatry of the heart.

- a. **Ezekiel 14:1-3** - *“Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. Then the word of the Lord came to: ‘Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts...’ ”*
- b. **Revelation 2:23** - *“I am he who searches hearts and minds.”*
- c. If God is really worth more than anything and anyone, then the priority of our time, money and energy should prove it; anything less is idolatry.
- d. Since there is no on-off switch regarding worship, it comes down to the choice of who or what you’re going to worship.

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **Revelation 2:18-29** to provide an overview for this study.
3. Spend time talking about Jezebel, Elijah and the prophets of Baal and their “showdown” on Mt. Carmel.
4. Pastor Gary said, “Jezebel’s influence Israel was not to replace God with idolatry, but to include God with idolatry.”
  - a. Have there been times when you’ve sensed you’ve allowed other people, hobbies, things, etc. to push the Lord out of first place in your life?
  - b. How has the Lord helped you keep the Lord and your relationship a priority?
5. Read and discuss this quote from Pastor Gary: “Idolatry is misplaced worth; it’s when other things that compete with God’s worth capture a person’s heart.”
6. Read and discuss idolatry of the hand. (See #21 above)
  - a. What are some of the things Christians struggle with today?
  - b. Allow the people in your group to share personal examples of things they struggle with and how the Lord is changing them.
7. Read and discuss **Ezekiel 14:1-3** and **Revelation 2:23**, focusing on the meaning of idolatry of the heart.
8. Close your time in prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to help each person: understand that idolatry is something they will have to deal with, even though

they don't have carved images, etc.; choose to put the Lord first in their life and remember that "idolatry of the heart" is as serious as "idolatry of the hand."



Note: Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New International Version (NIV 1984).