

Revelation 2:18-29; The Cost Of Following Jesus

In a few minutes I'm going to open the Bible with you and turn our attention to the Book of Revelation, but first I'd like to share another story from my recent trip to Northern Iraq.

I said last week that our denomination, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, is working in Northern Iraq because we are committed to reaching people who have no access to Jesus. The Alliance has been helping to provide food, shelter, clothing, and medical clinics for the Yazidis, in the wake of the devastation they've experienced at the hands of ISIS; the plan is to continue this support, and, to begin a church among them.

While I was in Kurdistan, we had the opportunity to visit the Yazidi's temple at Lalish; this temple is the equivalent of Islam's Great Mosque in Mecca, or, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The Yazidi's practice a monotheistic religion, that centres around a creator god and seven angels; chief among the angels is the peacock angel who alternatively manifests himself in the form of a black serpent. It's not so much that Yazidis worship the creator god but that they seek to appease the serpent who is understood as the mediator between the creator and humanity.

As we waited outside the temple for our guide, a number of Yazidi worshippers entered ahead of us, each one stooping down to kiss the black serpent that was fixed to the outside wall. Once inside we saw a number of pillars adorned by brightly coloured fabric. The picture behind me shows a woman tying a knot in the fabric; every knot represents a prayer offered by a Yazidi pilgrim—they believe that if they untie the knot left by another, that person will be granted their wish.

The temple moves from room to room, with the final chamber being their most holy place. At the end of this room lies a casket containing the remains of Sheik Adi—he is recognized as a reformer of their religion is believed by many to be an incarnation of the Peacock Angel/Serpent. His casket was draped in black cloth, and as worshippers approached the casket they knelt and kissed it repeatedly. The contrast between their worship and ours was stark. Yazidis kneel in a tomb, before a casket that holds a man's remains; we bow before Jesus because His tomb is empty—He died and rose again to life.

When we left the temple we gathered in the courtyard outside; it was hot day—42 degrees celsius—and so we found some shade a short distance away. To our surprise, we found a mural painted on a wall that depicted a scene from the Bible. On the picture behind me you can see the mural that we saw—there's Noah's Ark, the animals, and a dove carrying a tree branch. But there are a number of significant deviations in the way they tell the Noah story.

They teach that the creator god sent the flood as a judgement for the wickedness of humanity; Noah and his family were saved, along with the animals, so that a fresh start could be made—so far, their version tracks with the biblical story. However, they teach that before the waters receded, the Ark crashed into a mountain, the boat cracked and began to sink; Noah's family—and humanity itself—faced certain death. But the black serpent rescued humanity, coiling himself around the ark, keeping it together and effectively plugging the hole. In this story, the serpent is heralded as humanity's champion and saviour—this is part of the reason why the Yazidis worship him.

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Their name for the serpent—in Arabic—is Shaytan; when translated into English, the serpent is called Satan. The Bible teaches that Satan was cast down from heaven because he longed to be worshipped as God; here among the Yazidi's, Satan twisted the truth and he is receiving the worship he desires.

There is a darkness present among the Yazidis that goes far beyond the atrocities they have encountered, a darkness that comes from Satan's work among them. In one of the camps, our team members came across a woman who was writhing on the ground, unable to stand, because of demonic oppression—as prayer was offered in the powerful name of Jesus, this woman was released.

In Colossians 1:13-14, the Apostle Paul writes, “*For [the Father] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” The Yazidis are lost but don't know it, and Jesus loves them. My prayer is that the light of Jesus would shine in these Yazidi camps and that a thriving church would be planted in their midst so that the truth, love, power, and healing of Jesus might be known.

If you have your Bible with you this morning, I want to invite you to turn with me to Revelation 2:18-29; this is a message addressed to a church in the city of Thyatira. I'm going to read the text for you and then we'll take a look at how this ancient text speaks a living word to us today.

18 *“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 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.

20 *Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.*

24 *Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, ‘I will not impose any other burden on you, 25 except to hold on to what you have until I come.’*

26 *To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— 27 that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give that one the morning star. 29 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

This message to Thyatira is the longest of the seven messages, and in many respects the most difficult because it's the city about which we know the least. Thyatira is rarely mentioned in ancient literature and we have very little archaeological data to go on.

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What we do know about Thyatira suggests that it was a growing city due to growing economics. In John's day, Thyatira was well-known for the presence of its trade-guilds, particularly in the purple dye and bronze industries. These guilds posed a serious problem for Christians—joining a guild provided economic stability, but, it also meant participating in their social and spiritual activities. Again and again in *Revelation*, the underlying question seems to be: *who do you belong to? To Christ or to the world?*

Belonging to a trade guild meant more than sharing in common work, practically speaking, it meant that you lived in the same section of the city as other guild members, it meant having the same friends, attending the same events, and engaging in the same activities—think of belonging to the same clan, a band of brothers, or a sisterhood of sorts. In this kind of social makeup, individuality was not prized—sharing life, togetherness, and belonging was what mattered.

Gordon Fee writes, “all such trades had guilds, which were very close-knit clubs—a kind of local union—that served as the primary social structure for the artisans and their families. Each of these guilds had their patron deities, and the primary social events among the guilds were the festive meals, where food was served in contexts where it had been sacrificed to the patron deity. Very often these meals became an occasion for sexual immorality to flourish, where ‘girls’ were made available at the male-only meals.”

illus: Men, I want you to imagine what it would have been like to attend one of these meals; for the women among us, imagine what it

would have been like for your husband, father, or brother to attend one of these meals. The meal would begin with a cup of wine being pressed into your hands, following by a toast:

"Gentlemen, raise your glass and toast our god, Apollo, Son of Zeus—we honour him tonight because he is the one who provides us with work, he is the one who will protect us, and bless us." After raising your glass, you and everyone else were expected to then pour out the first portion of wine on the ground, as a sign of honour and allegiance to Apollo.

As Christian, how could you raise your glass in worship to Apollo? But as a member of the guild, how could you not? Refusing to raise your glass would be seen as an act of hostility towards Apollo, and, your fellow guild members. **It was a lose/lose situation.** Either you dishonour Christ in order to blend in, or, you honour Christ but risk your place in the guild and the economic stability it provided.

After the initial toast, a meal would ensue—meat sacrificed to the Apollo would be served to each one. As a Christian, could you eat this meat? If you abstained and ate only vegetables; what would everyone say? After dinner, it only got worse. Young girls would be paraded in, one for each of the guild members to sleep with. The Bible is very clear about sex before—or outside of—marriage but to refuse would have been seen as an act of disloyalty against the guild. *What was the Christian to do?*

As one author puts it, the good news concerning Jesus “has always been about **change** and **choice**.”¹ Jesus meets us where we are and

¹ Terry C. Muck, *NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 11.

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brings about *change*—our former way of life without Jesus is transformed into a new way of life with Jesus. *Choice* is equally important when it comes to following Jesus. We cannot become a new creation and continue to live as we once did; Jesus initiates **change** in our lives and we are left to **choose**—or reject—the **change** He brings.

In Western society, the individual is of primary importance, not the community, but when the Bible speaks about new life in Jesus, it talks about the people of God—the Church—in terms of being God’s new society. God’s new society becomes an alternative society, a new kind of family. When we choose to follow Jesus, we are meant to leave certain ideas, values, and behaviours behind—they are no longer suitable for the life we have been called to live. The Bible is relentless when it comes to holding what we believe and how we behave together—they are two sides of the same coin.

As much as the Western world champions individuality, there is tremendous pressure to conform our thinking and behaviour to cultural values. When everyone is on the same page, no one feels judged, but the moment someone says, “*I won’t do that,*” everyone’s behaviour is on the table for examination. Following Jesus makes life “better” in so many ways, but at times following Jesus puts us at odds with those around us.

illus: When I was recently in Senegal, I met a Christian brother who was formerly a Muslim; for the sake of his anonymity, I will refer to him as “Mike”. Mike was formerly an Imam—a teacher and worship leader in a mosque. Mike belonged to the direct line of the prophet

Mohammed, and from a young age he devoted himself to Koranic studies.

As a seeker after truth, Mike was interested in learning more about the Bible, and Christ, both of which are spoken about in the Koran. A number of years ago Mike met an Alliance International Worker and he began to ask him questions about Jesus. Over a period of two years, Mike became convinced that Jesus, not Mohammed, was the way to God.

At first, when Mike told his wife that he had become a Christian, she was okay with it, but when her parents found out, they took her away from him. When Mike refused to abandon Jesus, the parents married their daughter to another man; Mike hasn’t seen his wife or his son for more than three years. For Mike the choice was Jesus or his wife; Jesus or his son—*which would you choose?* For those in Thyatira the cost was Jesus or financial security, again, *which would you choose?*

In Thyatira, a woman from within the church, a self-proclaimed prophetess, began to suggest a third way—“*you don’t have to choose between Jesus and financial security...you can be loyal to Jesus and to the guild!*” In His message to the church, Jesus referred to this woman as “Jezebel” but it’s unlikely that there was a woman in the church who actually bore this actual name. Instead, this “nickname” corresponds to a well-known Queen in Old Testament Israel; Jezebel was well-known for introducing Israel to the worship of false gods.²

We are left to assume that Jezebel in Thyatira argued that Christians were free to join the trade guilds and participate in their feasts; after

² Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters To The Seven Churches Of Asia in Their Local Setting*, 119-120; cf. 1 Kings 16:31-33; 18:18; 21:25-26.

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all, since Apollo is not a real god, offering toast in worship amounted to nothing. Better yet, offer a toast to Apollo, but inwardly direct the toast to Jesus—the guild members would never know the difference.

As for sexual acts that took place at the feasts, very few in the Greco-Roman world would have considered these acts “wrong” in any meaningful way.³ Western culture tells us that our sexual appetite is like every other appetite; when our body is hungry, we need to feed it. An interviewee from a Rolling Stone article is quoted as saying, “Sex isn’t... a huge step. At the end of the day, it’s a piece of body touching another piece of body.”⁴ The Bible teaches something very different.

God has designed sex in such a way that it’s a profoundly unifying act—a marrying act—two people are united into one. Sex connects both bodies and souls. You may not view sex this way, this may not be your intention as you engage in sex, but it does not change the fact that God has designed sex to unite body and soul. Sex goes beyond the physical to the spiritual and sacred.

Application: I want to take a few moments to apply these words from Thyatira to our lives today. Every Christian, in each age of history, must wrestle with what it means to remain true to Jesus in the midst of culture. There are many things in our culture that are wonderful and ought to be enjoyed, but not everything is wonderful, or even neutral.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, 39.

⁴ Rolling Stone article: <http://feature.rollingstone.com/feature/millennial-sexual-revolution-relationships-marriage#ixzz3l85YSEmL>

⁵ Johnson, 92.

Jesus reminds us that this world, despite its many beauties, is profoundly broken. Our thinking has become darkened and our desires have become distorted. God has designed things in such a way that when we turn away from Him—worshipping other things, or, breaking God’s life-giving-commands—our lives begin to disintegrate. We cannot turn away from Him, and, find life.

illus: Darrell Johnson tells the story of a man who attended the church he pastored in the Philippines. This man’s work required him to travel a great deal within South East Asia—Manilla, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Tokyo. Each of these cities offered a wide array of distractions, including men and women for hire who would “satisfy” his desires. Knowing the temptations that awaited him, this man carried a picture of his wife and children in his briefcase and wallet—every time he opened them he was reminded of his loyalties. When temptation confronted him, he would pull out a picture of his wife and look into her eyes.

One night he was eating dinner at a hotel restaurant and an attractive woman approached him and asked whether he wanted to purchase her company for the evening. The man reached for his wallet, took out the picture he carried, pointing to his wife, and said, “*I belong to her.*” Darrell writes, “This is how we remain loyal to Jesus Christ—by carrying a picture of him close to our hearts and minds and regularly pulling out the picture and reminding ourselves, ‘I belong to Him.’”⁵

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My life belongs to Jesus Christ. I am His to direct; He is both Lord and Master. Where He follows I must go; He and He alone has my allegiance. When we compromise our loyalty to Jesus in order to blend in, secure our status, or get ahead, we take a detour that leads to a dead end.

Some of you grew up in the same era of the church that I did; the church was known for generating lists of behaviours that were considered sinful for Christians. Unfortunately, some of the behaviours that made this list weren't prohibited by the Scriptures themselves—enjoying a glass of wine and dancing, to name a few. In response to this “legalism,” many people left the church and never returned; others remained but they threw away these rigid lists.

My dear people, in our desire to follow Jesus, we don't need to go beyond what is written, but, we certainly need to pay attention to what **has** been written in His Word. Those who follow Jezebel's way claim that “freedom in Christ” means “we have the freedom to do whatever we want.” This is a lie that Satan would be happy for you to swallow. The truth is that Christ has set us free, but it's a **freedom from the enslaving power of sin, a freedom from distorted desires, a freedom to choose to follow Jesus.**

In Revelation 2:18, Jesus describes Himself as the One “*whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*” We cannot pull the wool over God's eyes; He sees where we are, who we are, and what we doing. The reference to burnished bronze speaks of His strength and splendour.

God is loving, merciful, holy, and strong; His words to Jezebel bear

this out. When we read vs. 21 we notice that Jesus had already offered her mercy; He had invited Jezebel to turn from her ways and repent but she refused—as a result, judgement was coming. The freedom God has given us is both a wonderful and a terrible thing—each of us are free to choose Jesus (and His way), but with this freedom comes a responsibility—we live with the consequences of our choices.

Conclusion: I want to conclude this morning by looking at the promise Jesus speaks to those who hold on to Him until the end.

vs. “26 To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— 27 that one ‘will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give that one the morning star. 29 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

We all need perspective, but perspective is something that none of us can gain on our own. Our perspective is compromised by a number of factors: our vantage point is limited by what we can see in the moment, and, because our sin, what we see is often distorted. We need God's perspective in order to see beyond. The Christians in Thyatira were between a rock and a hard place. They were being forced to choose between allegiance to Jesus and allegiance to their social network; choosing Jesus threatened their friendships and their livelihood.

Revelation broadens our perspective from the **here and now** to the **then and there**—life will not always be as we experience it today. There are those who use power to threaten and manipulate the people

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of God, but their time will be short-lived. One day every knee will bow before Jesus—His authority will be recognized by all. At present, the Church might experience powerlessness, but one day, the power of those who oppose Jesus will be broken just as easily as a clay pot thrown to the ground. And those who remain true to Jesus, will have a share in His rule—this is His promise, Jesus has foreseen it.⁶

The reference to receiving the “morning star” is ambiguous but it’s likely that this second promise is connected to the first. In Revelation 22:16, Jesus is referred to as the “bright Morning Star”.⁷ When Jesus returns to set the world right again, He will redeem His people; not only will we share in His authority, this “morning star” language is a promise that we will also share in His glory.

Revelation broadens our perspective from the **here and now** to the **then and there**. Yes, there is a cost to following Jesus, but our present struggles are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed when He returns. And so Jesus invites us to trust Him and to hold on. May the Holy Spirit enable us to carry a picture of Jesus close to our hearts and minds; since we belong to Him, let us remain true to Him.

Worship Response

Invitation to Prayer ministry

⁶ C.f. Revelation 12:5; 19:15. Jesus’ promise in Rev. 2:26-27 is taken from Psalm 2:7-10. In Psalm 2:8, King David, is given a promise that he will inherit the nations—the implication is that the nations belong to Jesus—the Son—and that those who are united to Jesus will join Him in His rule over the nations. Where they currently know powerlessness, they will one day join in Christ’s authority.

⁷ The first time this term appears, in Isaiah 14:12, it refers to the fallen King of Babylon—clearly a negative reference.

Perhaps you feel stirred by the Spirit this morning, and you find yourself wanting to respond to Jesus. Do you need His empowering touch this morning? Do you want to re-dedicate your life to following Jesus? Do you want to ask for His wisdom, or peace, or healing in your life?

In recent weeks, God has been working in our midst—people who have never been in church have been coming and experiencing God’s loving presence. As we have been praying, week by week, God has been answering prayers. After the service concludes, please come forward and our prayer ministers would love to pray for you this morning

Benediction