

The Deep Things of Satan

by Steve Zeisler

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

These are the well known opening lines of Charles Dickens' Tale of Two Cities, his description of tension and the struggle for balance in Europe during the time of the French Revolution. Human history is dynamic. We live with contending pressures and often solve one problem by creating another. The Lord's words to seven first century churches, taken together, recognize our tendency to leap from frying pan into fire and minister to our need to find a righteous balance in our service of him.

This is a key time in the history of Peninsula Bible Church. We are asking questions such as, "How can we be a biblical church? How can we correct failure? How can we be a people who worship and have living fellowship together and also reach out with generosity and love? How can we be a people of truth and love, evangelism and concern for the needy, loving a God who is both transcendent and incarnate among us? How can we be a church in balance so that we don't allow the attacks of the enemy to succeed, being strong in one area and weak and failing in another?" That is one of the main reasons for this series in the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation. In them the Lord provides balance-- where one church is weak another is strong.

There is an orientation to the past, the present or the future in these letters. In the first letter the church at Ephesus was told to go back into its past and remember the love which it had lost so as to regain it again. The church at Sardis, which we will look at next week, also had a great past but they had long since lived beyond their greatness. That church is also told to remember where they had been and return to that. The letter before us today, to the church at Thyatira, had a great but a threatened present, much as the church at Smyrna had a great present but faced grave threats in the future. The church at Philadelphia, which we will look at in a few weeks, had been given an open door of opportunity if they would but succeed in resisting temptation and be what they ought to be in the here and now. Here again we see this balance which the Lord is seeking in his church.

In the letter to the church at Thyatira we will see that the fullest praise is given to it, but we will also see that it will face the most frightening threats of any of the churches. This church, based in the least important of any of the cities in this series of letters, is the recipient of the longest letter. It is offered a great and glorious future, but history offers no record, good or bad, of what became of this church.

Revelation 2:18-29:

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, who has eyes like a name of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: "I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-- servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them-- I place no other burden on you. Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will

give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

One of the important needs for balance in a church is between the enthusiasm of youth and the wisdom that comes with maturity. The Thyatiran church was out of balance in this respect. Youthful vigor was clearly evident, but they faced a serious danger because they were not wise enough to handle the temptation to excess. The love of experience for its own sake threatened to destroy them.

Let us consider the commendation of this church at Thyatira. Verse 19: "I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first." What a positive statement! This was not a loveless church, as was the church at Ephesus. This was not a church that was living on its reputation, as was the church at Sardis. This was not a hypocritical church, as the church at Laodicea will prove to be. Love, faith, service to others, self-sacrifice in reaching out to others, perseverance in the face of trials and growth, all of these things were true of the church at Thyatira. Their present deeds were greater than their former. They were continuing to grow in the Lord. There was a vital, youthful energy obvious in this church.

I was a young Christian during the "body life" heyday of Peninsula Bible Church, when this church was reaching out to the community around and to the disaffected youth of the '60's. Exciting things were happening every day. Christians from many parts of the world took an interest in the love, faith, perseverance and service of the saints in this church.

Back then I was a self-- impressed writer of leaflets. In my youthful exuberance I would try to condense everything there was to say about the universe and God's place in on one side of an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet! The Vietnam war, the deterioration of our environment, whatever, all got the same treatment from me-- a leaflet holding forth causes and solutions. But experience has taught me that I was too young and too immature to discern the depth and the nuances of such critical issues. The questions were much more profound than I imagined back then. This church had given me and my friends a printing press which we set up in a garage. Whenever something occurred that we felt needed comment we invented a new organization and issued leaflets setting out our viewpoints. It was an exciting time. There was energy, faith, love and perseverance evident among our group and among this church as a whole. Young Christians have a sense of excitement about the touch of God in their lives and his presence leading them into action. Involvement in issues, not discussion of them, characterize their actions. Where's the action? That was our recurring question then. We didn't care for extensive discussion.

This church at Thyatira had the same strength -- the strength of youthful enthusiasm and excitement. But the problem with that is, if there is a lack of godly, mature leadership, then the young will not be able to discern problems when they arise. That was what was wrong with the church at Thyatira. A prophetess (and we should regard this reference not as a symbol but as a living woman) was offering them what the Lord calls "the deep things of Satan." Recalling one of the awful figures of the Old Testament, our Lord labels this woman "Jezebel." She was a teacher, one who had something to say to the people of her church. I think what she was offering was "the deep things." That was a phrase that was common currency among them. "Go and see this prophetess if you want to learn the deep things, the magic, strange, wonderful, deep things," people said. But Jesus describes these things as "the deep things of Satan." What she was offering was deadly and would lead to destruction. Yet she was allowed to continue teaching in this church. As we have seen in the other letters, the "angel" (verse 18) is representative of the human leadership in any given congregation. The leadership in this church, therefore, had not acted as it should and was tolerating something wicked in its midst.

Let us look again at what Jesus said was true of this woman and her followers (verse 20):

But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-- servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of

sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.

Balaam was an ideas man, a teacher, a spokesman, a thinker who taught Balak, the king of Moab, to destroy the Israelites by seduction. He spoke from a far away mountain top. Jezebel had married into the family. Her power stemmed from her presence in the king's bedroom. Her beguiling sensuality, not just her words, was what had led Ahab astray to believe in her god Baal and lead his people to do likewise. The terrible results of their idolatry are detailed in the Old Testament story. In these verses Jesus says of the woman in Thyatira, "I will kill her children with pestilence." Jezebel's two sons died in pain and dishonor. Her husband Ahab died in disgrace, the dogs licking his blood as a statement of the contempt he was held in as a result of his marriage to Jezebel. Because she had led the people of God astray, she was thrown from a window and trampled so that her body could not even be recovered for burial. There was a horrible result everywhere she went.

In I Kings 18 Elijah confronted 450 prophets of Baal, Jezebel's servants and spiritual associates (like the close followers of the Thyatiran prophetess). Their worship of Baal was based on erotic experience and frenzy. They failed in their combat with Elijah and were summarily executed. What the Lord is saying here is that there was someone like Jezebel in the midst of the church at Thyatira, one who had the same kind of influence on them as Jezebel had in her day on the nation of Israel centuries earlier. Further, he is saying that the results of their identifying with her will also be the same. Immorality, associated with disease or pestilence, associated with death, form an all too common triumvirate. We see it everywhere in this generation disease that kills brought on by licentious behavior.

There is a great threat to a young church which is not wise enough to see what it is doing, when it is offered "drugs, sex and rock and roll," to use the modern idiom, thrills and excitement, the inner experience, the enchantment of someone who claims to know things and can produce erotic stimulation as well as a kind of spiritual covering for what is being offered. A New Testament church with similar problems was the church at Corinth. Paul loved this exciting, impressive, large church but he was forever trying to correct their thinking in these areas. The Corinthians also loved the deep things and fought to associate themselves with the impressiveteachers. Paul scored them for their arrogant love of knowledge, for their drunkenness at communion, for their sexual immorality, for their love of ecstasy, for being caught up with miracles and ecstatic languages, and for their failing to care about purity and God's reputation in their midst.

Years ago when I lived in Chicago the local power company had an advertising jingle which I still remember. It went, "Electricity costs less today, you know/Than it did many long years ago." As I was reading this passage, for some reason that jingle came to mind. Actually, "spiritual electricity" has a very high price indeed. Jesus is warning these people that there is a tremendous price to pay for the electric experiences and excitement in knowing the "deep things." If that is what you are seeking in your spiritual walk, the price you pay may be your life. We open ourselves up to tremendous dangers if we seek power, authority and knowledge in an inappropriate way.

Last week a group within our body staged Dorothy Sayers' play, "The Devil to Pay," the story of Faustus, who wanted to be greater and wiser than others but who instead became terribly destructive to himself and to the world. In the book of Acts we read of Simon, the magician from Samaria, who offered to pay Peter for the power to confer the Spirit of God on people. The power, the electricity, the touch, the authority were what Simon was seeking, not purity and righteousness. We see that happen time and again. Following the play I talked with a young woman who had come out of a background in the occult. She reacted negatively to the play because the subject matter was too real, she said. As a young Christian, before she knew better, she confessed, she wanted the touch of God so badly in her life that she was susceptible to liars and deceivers who offered that to her. But now she is wiser. She is still enthusiastic for the things of God, but now she has gained wisdom to go with her excitement. She does not want thrills any more, she told me, but truth, the character of God as well as the touch of God in her life. The longing for power by itself, for miracles, magic and hidden knowledge is not far removed from susceptibility to drugs, orgasmic abandon, the dark frenzies of the Baal of Jezebel. Enthusiasm without wisdom is dangerous.

The leaders of the church at Thyatira had made a terrible mistake in becoming tolerant of the Jezebel in their midst. Speaking of himself, Jesus says in verse 21, "I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality." He had given this woman time to repent. He had reached out to her to bring her back, but he finally determined that she would not listen to his voice. Patience in reaching out to someone to save them is a good thing, but patience that tolerates evil is a very bad thing. This prophetess was exciting and energetic. She had a following. There was a mystery and an enthusiasm about her. That seemed to be good enough for the leaders of this church. They neglected to look behind the facade and see the source of that enthusiasm. The "deep things" she was offering were "the deep things of Satan."

Once the Lord had called the followers of this woman to repent (verse 22: "unless they repent of her deeds"), he then says, "I place no other burden on you" (verse 24). This is very important. Jesus is not saying, "In your effort to combat this weakness you must become like the church at Ephesus, thoroughly stamping out evil and false thinking to such an extent that you stamp out love as well." Rather he is saying if they will correct the abuse he will not ask anything more of them because they are basically very healthy, as was apparent by their love, their faith, service and perseverance. It is right for Peninsula Bible Church as it is for any individual Christian or group of Christians to desire vitality and joy. We should be excited when we meet together in his name and have appreciation for what he has done for us. God wants us to have a vital faith. But in the midst of our joy he also wants us to be wise in discerning the siren song of Jezebel so that we have the character and righteousness of God as much a part of our thinking as our enthusiasm in fellowship.

Our God is an active God. Think for a moment on what Jesus says of himself in these verses: "The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze." This is our God who ". . . shall rule [the nations] with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces" (verse 27). He is offering to share his rule with his people in his program of remaking the world. Ours is an active God and we should expect him to act in a way that will excite and astonish us. But notice also that he has "eyes like a flaming fire." He has piercing insight to search the hearts and the minds of his people, looking not only for action but for character and purity. As he urges us to follow him he is weighing what we are becoming.

Following spiritually dry spells we are most susceptible to the sins which we see recorded in this letter to the church at Thyatira. When we have spent days, weeks, even months or longer without the intimacy of fellowship with other Christians, without being used of God (either through our own choices or because of what God is putting us through), it is then we are most vulnerable to this kind of failure. When we ask ourselves, "Where is the faith I once had?" "Am I still a Christian?" when our hunger for the presence of God is strongest it is then we are likely to succumb to the lies of a charlatan offering the excitement of inner knowledge, the deep things of God, the erotically--tinged pastimes to appease our spiritual hunger. Let us recommit ourselves and say no matter how we feel, no matter how we long for an experience that will validate our faith we will not depart from the wisdom that demands purity and righteousness side by side with spiritual excitement. Let us commit ourselves to refuse an offer of the "deep things" lest they be "the deep things of Satan." We need to be committed not only to the fountain of everlasting life that wells within us but also to righteousness. We need leadership in this church, not only pastors, elders and Sunday School teachers, but also leaders in homes, hundreds of people who will manifest for a while the patience God has with us but who will refuse to tolerate forever this kind of sin.

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