

Revelation 2:18-29 // "Coming Soon"

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[0 : 0 0] churches. Heavenly Father, we praise you for your revealed will, your life-giving word, and we ask that you will open the eyes of our hearts, that we might know you better and respond rightly to who you are. For we ask in the name of our great King, the living one, who was dead and is now alive forever, the Lord Jesus. Amen. So a key issue for us tonight is thinking about repentance, about tolerance. Repentance is a key issue, but tolerance is, I think, the key idea in the letter. And usually when we think about tolerance, we're thinking about a good thing. If you think about living with other people, my wife said to me yesterday, Martin, talk this through with me. You got the toothpaste out of the box. You left the box on top of the bin in the bathroom. What? Just talk me through that decision.

You know that when your flatmate floods the bathroom, getting in and out of the shower, or they leave their vegetable peelings on the counter in the kitchen, or that thing people do of leaving the cereal bowl on top of the dishwasher. What's that about? Tolerance is good, and we want more tolerance in bigger areas of life as well, when we see people fighting over what they believe. But then tolerance shouldn't be our supreme value, and we do see that at times. In fact, if tolerance is your supreme value, you can often become very intolerant of people you decide are not as tolerant as you'd like them to be, ironically. In Germany last week, there were massive marches, maybe 100,000 people marched in Germany, in protest against the AFD, the growing popularity of the far-right party. And as they marched on the streets of Frankfurt and other cities, the issue was that the AFD have had meetings where they've talked about a policy of mass deportation of immigrants from Germany. So the people are out on these marches. You could argue that that is an intolerant thing to do, to march against the ideology of that political party. They are being intolerant, and yet it's a good thing, is it? Well, maybe you'd think it's a good thing to take a stand against views that seem hateful. So what kind of tolerance is appropriate out there in the world? And also, more as we come to this letter, what kind of tolerance is appropriate within the church among God's new community? Well, we're in this Bible book revelation written by the Apostle John, one of Jesus' closest followers, who talks in another letter about how he saw him and he touched him. Jesus, he was with him, and he had this revelation later in life on the island of Patmos, brought to him by an angel, brought to the angel by Jesus, brought to Jesus from God.

And in this section of the letter, we're looking at letters that were written from Jesus addressing seven of his churches in what is now modern-day Turkey. And they're kind of representative, these seven churches. They're real churches with real issues, but help all of us churches, between Jesus' resurrection and his return. And they're carefully structured, the seven letters, around this one. This is the middle letter. And the first thing to get a grip on is who is speaking these letters. So if you just look at verse 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. So folks, behold Jesus as he is tonight. It's not a literal picture, like a photograph.

[3 : 4 3] This is visionary language for us to be left with a deep impression of who Jesus is today, that his eyes are like blazing fire. This idea of them being both penetrating and pure and holy, looking searchingly into our hearts. And his feet are like burnished bronze, a picture of strength and of splendor. And most significant of all, at the beginning of that address, these are the words of the Son of God. Now, the Son of God is a word that I think often when we talk about the Son of God, we are speaking about God's, about Jesus's divine nature, his eternal nature. In John chapter 1, it talks about the Son as this eternal one, who was, because God has always been eternally a father and a son in the unity of the Spirit. But the Son of God is also in the Bible a title for a human king, who God appoints. And that is the kind of way in which it's being used here in verse 18. And we know that because at the end of this same letter we'll come to, Jesus unmistakably quotes from a

psalm that uses that language about the king, Psalm 2. So in Psalm 2, which is about the Messiah, I mean, why don't we just turn back to it actually? It's such a good psalm. There aren't many bits of scripture, I know off by heart, but Psalm 2 is one that's well worth memorizing. In fact, on Contagious

Camp a couple of years ago, my niece learned Psalm 2 to the tune of Bon Jovi, living on a press. If any of you don't feel you could memorize it without that help, come and see me, I can pass that on to you.

But Psalm 2, on page 543, this is a psalm, I think, unmistakably pointing forward to God's forever king.

And you see in verses 1 and 2, this question being asked of, why does everyone turn against God and kind of in their heart rebel against God and God's king? So it says in verse 2, the kings of the earth rise up, the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, that's his Messiah, his king. And what they say is, let us break their chains and throw off their shackles. So you see the idea there, God being in charge of my life is constraining. Let's break those chains, let's rebel against God, let's conspire against him. And then God scoffs at that because of his power and where he's seated in the highest place. He rebukes them. And the answer is in verse 6, he says, I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain. So he's speaking there about a human king and in its first context about Israel's king, but looking forward to the ultimate king in David's line. And then the voice changes in verse 7 to that king himself speaking. Verse 7, I will proclaim the Lord's decree. He, the Lord, said to me, you are my son. Today I have become your father. So this is the human king of God's people being declared to be the son of God. And God's saying to him, when you ask me,

I'll make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You'll break them with a rod of iron. You will dash them to pieces like pottery. And then the psalm ends with this kind of warning against rebels against Jesus. And then verse 12 at the end, the very end of the psalm, you see that invitation, blessed are all who take refuge in him, in the son. So Jesus back in Revelation 2 is declaring himself to be that appointed forever king. And you can see that that raises the stakes to think, are we going to listen to him? He has the authority to address his people and to be listened to. We're not to kind of want to break his chains and throw off his fetters. I'm reading Good Night, Mr. Tom at the moment, which is a kid's book actually, because our kids are reading it.

[7 : 55] But it's got this moment in the book where there's this evacuee boy and he's in this village. And the whole village, 1939, the whole village gather in the church building, just because it's the only building big enough to hold them all. Because one of them's got a radio and they want to listen to Neville Chamberlain. And he declares on the radio that the nation is at war. And you can imagine being in that room in a village in anywhere in the UK in 1939 and nobody moving. Everyone craning their ears to hear this important man with an important message. And that's the kind of idea as we come to this letter from Jesus. And our first point is a church that's making progress in verse 19. Jesus says, I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Now this is deeply reassuring. And when we hear that, we're to be encouraged if we can look for that kind of thing in our lives. What reassures me about this, what Jesus sees in the church, is that there's no mystery to what is healthy in the Christian life, to what we're aiming for.

The Christian life is difficult, but it's not complicated. All through the New Testament, it talks about faith and hope and love among God's people, trying to grow in faith and hope and love. And here, Jesus says, I know your deeds. With his blazing eyes, he can see what's going on. And what he commends them for, well he mentions love first, but then we'll come back to that, because then he has these three ideas together, which are basically faith, hope and love. So he mentions their faith, service, which is the idea of, that's how our love is displayed. We demonstrate our love for God when we serve him. And perseverance, which is about hope. You persevere through difficult times because of future hope. And then at the beginning of that series, he talks first about love. So when Jesus looks on a church, and when he looks at our hearts and our lives, it's not like he's setting us an exam, and he's not told us yet what the questions are, and we're to worry that we might have missed something.

He wants to see faith and hope and love. Faith, service, perseverance in our lives. And the reason I think there's the double mention of love, that he puts love first, is because a theme across these letters is that love for Jesus is foundational to doing things right in the Christian life. And keeping

that fire ablaze in our hearts is so important, because he already has criticized the church at the beginning of chapter 2 for having forgotten their first love, the love they used to have for him. And here, he's delighted that this church, he knows that they love him, and that's being displayed in these kind of ways. And then Jesus adds at the end of verse 19 that they're now doing more than they did at first.

So what matters here is the trajectory that they are on. And again, I think that's really encouraging. Often in the Christian life, when we think of ourselves, or we think of a friend, or of somebody we've met at church that we're trying to look out for, what matters is trajectories. What direction are we going in, compared with where they were maybe six months ago in the Christian life, or a year ago? Are there signs that they've been growing in love, faith, perseverance? And for each of us, we hear that Jesus knows what's really going on in our hearts. And we could ask ourselves, what trajectory am I really on? And you might feel there are lots of ways you fall short in the Christian life, because we all do. And especially if you're someone who comes to church with a friend who's been a Christian longer than you, and they've brought you along. And you might look at their life and kind of think, I just don't really measure up to them. They're so committed. Well, praise God that they're so committed. The question to ask yourself, though, is, am I on the right trajectory?

Is there a sign in my life that I'm growing? Because if there is, then that's something to be encouraged by. So the king is speaking, and first he sees progress in this church. But then we get to what's going on in Thyatira, and that's really the focus that's kind of more of the letter.

[12:16] It's a church that's too tolerant. I once heard about a wife who, I think actually this was Tim Keller, Tim and Kathy Keller, I think I've got this right, in their marriage, there was a point in their marriage where Kathy Keller realized that there was an issue that Tim had not, he's a Christian writer, so don't worry if you don't know who I'm talking about, but he wasn't really listening to her saying, he hadn't grasped that this was a big issue. So he got home one day, and she, in a very measured, calm way, smashed crockery. She just kept dropping plates on the floor, smashing them, to communicate to him, this is really important, okay, which apparently was effective. I'm not, I don't recommend that in marriage preparation, but very interesting. Now Jesus does that here in the letter with a name, okay. How many people do you know who are committed Christians who are called

Jezebel? I mean, if you are called Jezebel, okay, I'm sorry, this is not about you, but we don't have many, I've not met a Jezebel who's a Christian. In our church family, we've got some great names for kids, we've got a Micah, we've got an Asher, we've got a Hannah, and next week we're baptizing Timothy, and you can never have too many kids in a church called Boaz, but we have no Jezebels, and that's because Jezebel was a catastrophic queen of the people of God in the Old Testament. She was from the outside, she was the daughter of this pagan priest king, Ethbal, but she got into this position of dangerous power among the people of God, because the king of God's people, who should have known better, married her, the king of Israel, and she led the people into idolatry. She had the prophets of God killed, she swore she'd kill Elijah, she had Naboth falsely accused and put to death. It was horrible.

So fast forward to this church in Thyatira, centuries later, and the crockery smashing moment is in verse 20. Jesus says, nevertheless, I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. So I take it that she's not actually called Jezebel. Do you see what's going on? There is someone in the church that they would have known. They could identify the woman in their church with this prophetic ministry, and Jesus says, you're tolerating Jezebel in your church. He condemns the church for not taking action to remove her ministry and its influence from them. So what's the nature of this false prophecy? Well, she doesn't get people to renounce Jesus. That would be too easy to spot. She just teaches, it seems, that you can have Jesus, and you can have other things as well. Her teaching is that Jesus permits you to do things that his word makes clear that he doesn't want you to do. And it's good we think about this, because it's not hard to see the ways we could easily drift into the same kind of dangers in our church life today. Remember that problem the nations had with God back in Psalm 2? He's constraining. Let's break their chains. Let's throw off their fetters.

[15:35] The world thinks of God's word and Jesus' words as constraining, and Jesus says, it's true freedom. If you hold to my teaching, the truth will set you free. He gives us everything good. He wants us to flourish as we delight in knowing him and enjoying the good things he's given us according to his design. But the oldest lie in the book, the lie that Adam and Eve believed in the

Garden of Eden, was that God's rules are because God is not good. He's unduly restrictive, and it's not what's best for us. So we find this kind of teaching, this Jezebel-type teaching, that's more permissive than God's word, we find it very attractive.

Look at what Jesus says halfway through verse 20. By her teaching, she misleads my servants, that's who Christians are, my servants, into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. Now we know from the early church, from Acts chapter 15, these were two key markers when people became Christians. When you were a new Christian from a pagan background, the early church, two of the key things to mark you out as distinct from the family you'd come from, the culture around you, you don't join in when food sacrificed to idols and you abstain from sexual immorality.

And when it talks about food being sacrificed to idols, it's not as simple as today, us being told, oh you've become a Christian, don't go to the mosque anymore for Friday prayers. We would find that, I think we find that an easy thing to grasp. But to be a faithful Christian in that society meant you missed out economically because all the kind of, the work was tied in with these trade guilds that had patron gods and they would have started their meetings with a sacrifice to a pagan god that as a Christian you'd have had to withdraw from. And you'd have missed out socially because a lot of the gatherings and feasts that the calendar was run by were to false gods. You can ask our Hong Kongers, our church family, those who are from Hong Kong, it's Chinese New Year coming up and Joanne was telling me how Chinese New Year is such a big thing in Hong Kong, but the most popular song at Chinese

New Year that you'd hear in the shopping malls and things is, I know I'll be saying this wrong, but Kai Shen Dao invoking the god of wealth, asking him to come at New Year. And so when you have the kind of New Year and it gets to greeting one another and saying Happy New Year, what people say in Cantonese is, which is a saying just meaning be wealthy, wishing someone would be wealthy. But because a lot of the songs are invoking this pagan god who is the god of wealth, Kai Shen Dao, what you're actually doing is praying to that god that the person you're greeting will be wealthy. So as a Christian in that culture, Joanne's telling me that what Christians do in that culture is they say Happy New Year and they look really weird because they're not saying the phrase that everyone else says. And so it's the most, you know, the central event in the culture, Christians have to look different and distinctive. But what a great way of saying we won't bow to the pagan god that you serve with this kind of folklore. Jesus does not mix happily with the gods of people around us. He calls us to be faithful to him exclusively, just as he is faithful to us. He's just asking us to love him as he loves us.

And the other area we have to avoid is sexual immorality. And the word that's used here in the Bible for that is pornea, which is where we get our word pornography from. And it's a word that in the Bible covers all sexual intimacy that falls outside of committed faithful marriage between one man and one woman. Jesus calls us in his word to make sure that among you there's not even a hint of sexual immorality. So listening to him on this starts with reforming our own personal culture with honest, conscious, turning to him from the ways that our culture maybe has led us to think about sex and practice sex. And that is an area that I think we all struggle with. I think every one of us has struggles in that area. Listening to Jesus' words on sexual immorality means helping each other with the culture we have as a church. So that if your friend says they're going on holiday with a group of mates and their boyfriend will be there or their girlfriend will be there, it's a good thing. It's an entirely good thing to say to them, what will the sleeping arrangements be? And that should be a normal kind of question that we ask one another as we help each other be accountable so that we as a culture are radically distinctive, just as the church in Thyatira was being called to be. And we want to have a church culture where we're trying to help each other in these areas. We're able to be honest about our struggles in these areas. And you can imagine in first century Roman culture, this kind of teaching about God's design for marriage was seen as so radical that people would have said it was harmful, it was bad for you, unduly limiting. And here was a prophetess in the church teaching more permissively, offering to break the chains and throw off the fetters. Maybe she was saying, well, what you do with your body doesn't really matter as long as your inner spirit still loves Jesus. Or maybe that teaching worked for Jewish culture around Jerusalem, but it's not going to work up here in Asia. We're a different culture, a different time. And in verse 22, Jesus warns that judgment is coming as a result.

[21 : 48] Verse 22, Jesus says, 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 their ways. And then verse 23, I will strike her children dead. It's really strong language, isn't it, of the people who were following her message that it's spiritual death. I think one of the reasons the language is so strong is it's picking up on what happened to Jezebel, that she actually was cast down from a window, actually, eventually in a military coup and her son was killed. So I think it's kind of language that kind of alludes to that judgment on historic Jezebel. And of course, the appropriate action a church should take against a false teacher is nothing like this. But there is a spiritual judgment from Jesus against false teaching.

And we are called to distance ourselves from false teaching. In our own church, that might mean that there are times when we have to stand down people who, by their doctrine or by their lifestyle, are teaching something that is not faithful to the Bible.

Things that affirm and bless what Jesus calls sinful. And it can affect our relationship with other churches. There are times when we as a church have to distance ourselves from other churches and the teachers in those churches because look at the language Jesus uses about teaching that goes beyond His Word. It affects the judgment calls that we might make if we move to a different city and we're looking for another church. And we need to find out, is what this church teaches in areas like this faithful to the Bible? And let me say, I really hate this kind of thing, temperamentally. I really, really dislike having to do this. I think it makes us sound mean. I think it makes me sound mean.

But actually, we have to remember, it's not loving to tolerate false teaching. What a horrible thought that you could find yourself being affirmed in your church by the leaders for a lifestyle that actually places you outside Christ under God's judgment. What a horrible thought that is. And Christians in other cultures, I think, get this better than us. So I met a couple last April in Kigali at Gafcon, this conference that a few of us were on. Chigioki and Comfort, there they are. We were in these prayer groups over the week. And Chigioki is a bishop. They were spiritual giants, these two. I mean, it was extraordinary to be with them. They were humble, prayerful, steeped in the Bible. Everything you want to be in your life, Chigioki and Comfort are.

And I stayed in touch with Chigioki. So I told him that we're in Revelation 2 this week as a church. And he wrote a letter to us as a church. So he's written to us, and I'm not going to read the whole letter, but let me read some of what Chigioki has said to us. I can show anyone who wants the whole letter after. Beloved in Christ, he says, I bring you greetings from the churches in the Diocese of Udi, Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion, especially Cathedral Church. We rejoice in the fellowship of our churches in the Anglican Communion, as we remember that we are all one in Christ, and therefore not alone. Then he talks about the problems they face in their context of people leaving the church for idol worship, and also of persecution. He says, here in Nigeria, we face persecutions. Persecution will not destroy the church, but false teachings will, because it brings decay from within. We are particularly worried that false teaching will destroy the church in the West, whether in Scotland, in England, in North America, so long as false teaching is welcomed or imbibed, especially in the area of sexual immorality. Brothers and sisters, we are concerned that your church in the West is in great danger, and we urge you to stand firm for the Lord Jesus Christ. Hold firm to the faith once for all delivered to the saints, the word of life in the scriptures, as you run with eternity in view. Let us continue to pray for one another that the enemy will not sneak in and destroy all our labor in the Lord, which we know is not in vain. Comfort and I, with the brethren here, shall continue to pray for St. Silas, that you will remain a beacon of light, beaming the truth of the gospel for others to follow. So we worry about them when we hear life is hard.

[26 : 44] They worry for us because they see an enemy within in the church in the West, and the answer to that comes from just loving Jesus well. When we know that Jesus loves us, we can trust his word, and we have a settled trust that wherever his word leads us, that is the right path to follow.

We don't need to resent the parameters he sets. So in Thyatira, we found a church that's making progress. It's a church that's too tolerant. But thirdly, it is a church with an amazing future.

Jesus says he won't ask anything else of them except verse 25. Hold on to what you have until I come. So again, it's not easy, but it's not complicated, is it? Hold on to what you have already from Jesus, and he promises it's worth it in verse 26. To the one who is victorious, that is in Revelation language, the one who keeps going in the faith, to the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. 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. You see those words? They're the words we saw in Psalm 2, that the Father has said of the Son. Amazingly, strangely, Jesus is saying here that his people will join in that victory of his on judgment day. As he quashes all rebellion against him, all that's evil, and he defeats the devil, that in some way for his people who've been watching and waiting for him, we will join in with that righteous victory.

And then verse 28, I will also give that one the morning star. When people spoke about the morning star, it was actually Venus at the time, because it shone in the sky like a star during the day, and its steadfast presence up above in the sky came to be associated with the reign of kings.

[28 : 50] Just as you look up in the daytime and see the morning star, so Caesar is still reigning, and so on, that kind of idea. And so Jesus says at the end of Revelation, in chapter 22, I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright morning star. So he's the son of David of Psalm 2, God's forever king, and he is the one who reigns forever, the bright morning star. Just as we can see the morning star rise as a constant, a physical reality in the heavens. So every day, Jesus reigns from heaven, the throne room of God, until he comes to claim his full and final victory, and inherits the nations.

So what does he mean when he says, I will give you, I will give that one the bright morning star? He will give us himself. Just as we heard last week, and say to the church in Sardis, they will walk with me one day. This is the Jesus who came to John in chapter one, and he was so glorious and terrifying that John fell to his feet. He fell at Jesus' feet, and Jesus placed his right hand on him and said, don't be afraid. The king of Psalm 2 offers us close friendship, a future walking closely with him.

And in this life, that might feel like we're missing out. Or you might be on the outside of the Christian faith, looking in tonight, and thinking that, thinking actually what Jesus says about all this stuff seems too limiting. Or you might be on the inside as a Christian, but that kind of more permissive teaching might be tempting you, and Jesus' road might seem too narrow. But let's remember the contrast here, that Jezebel destroys her children, but Jesus dies for his children. Jezebel here was a false prophet who came under God's judgment. She was cast down, and her children died. All who follow her die.

But Jesus is the true prophet, and he came under God's judgment. He was cast down for his children, so that all who follow him will find life, and that life will be life with him. Isn't he who we want to be with? The morning star, the son of God, the king of heaven, eyes of flaming fire? Let's pray together.

Father, we praise you, risen Jesus Christ, and we acknowledge your authority, that you have been exalted as Lord, and our times are in your hands. You know our deeds. We ask that you, by your spirit, will enlarge our hearts, to grow in love for you, to grasp your love for us, to see a better vision of you, that we will hold on to what we have, and not wander from the path you've set before us until you come.

[32 : 05] Help us to abound in love, and faith, and perseverance, and service, until you give us the morning star in your name we pray. Amen.