

Two Women from Thyatira

The town of Akhisar now stands on the site of Thyatira, which was a busy city in the Roman province of Asia, in the west of modern-day Turkey. In first-century Roman times, it was famous as the centre of the fabric-dyeing trade, especially its own characteristic version of purple dye, really a deep red now known as 'Turkey Red'. Because this dye was made from madder roots instead of crushed shellfish, it was significantly cheaper than classic 'Tyrian Purple', but it was still an expensive process – and big business. By all accounts, the city was a major business centre with many other trades also flourishing there.

Lydia

An enterprising businesswoman called Lydia took her trade in purple fabric many miles from her home town, and it was in the city of Philippi in Macedonia that the apostles Paul and Silas (along with Timothy and Luke) first met her (**Acts 16**). In their travels, they normally went straight to the synagogue in every town and city, proclaiming the good news of Jesus as the promised Messiah to the assembled Jewish congregation, which would usually include a number of 'proselytes' who were not Jews by birth but who had adopted the Jewish religion.

But Philippi had no synagogue,¹ despite being a 'leading city of the district of Macedonia', so the four men went looking for a 'place of prayer' where there might be a small gathering. Apparently these were often near rivers, so as to have water readily available for ceremonial washing, so they went to the riverside, just outside the city gate, and found a group of women who were prepared to listen to what they had to say. Lydia was one of them. She was not a Jew by birth but was a 'worshipper of God', following the Jewish religion, and she responded to Paul's words, believing in Jesus and being baptised. It was not long before she invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house.

And so it was that they continued to meet at the riverside, going there through the town for 'many days'. Their reputation spread, not least because of the slave girl with an evil spirit who kept on calling out, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." When Paul told the evil spirit to leave her – and it did – her masters lost a very useful source of income from her fortune-telling. They complained to the magistrates and stirred up a crowd, triggering a massive reaction which resulted in Paul and Silas being imprisoned. Their singing and praying – with the other prisoners listening – the great earthquake that shattered the prison – the jailer nearly killing himself and then coming to faith in Jesus – and their eventual release the next day – it's all there in **Acts 16**.

Notice what they did when they were released: They went to Lydia's house (**v.40**). Well, of course they would, that was where they had been staying! Even though they were apparently planning to move on, they would have gone there to collect their belongings. But who else was there? ". . . when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed." There were other believers there in her house, probably more than just her household.

In only a fairly short time, starting with just a few women meeting by a riverside, there were now 'brethren' (so some men were definitely included) **and** they had started gathering in Lydia's house! It had begun with the Lord 'opening her heart' to respond to what Paul was saying. She had followed that with 'the obedience of faith' and had been baptised (along with all her household!) and had then extended her hospitality to the apostolic party. After that, it seems that the young church may have started meeting at her house.

Out of one woman's response, a church was born, and it seems that all those believers in Philippi adopted the same approach as Lydia had done, right from the start. Years later, writing

¹ A minimum of 10 adult Jewish men was needed for a synagogue to be established.

to them from a Roman prison (again!), Paul said “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of **your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.**”¹

Lydia was, first of all, responsive. Out of her own response, she became an enabler of others. Not pushing herself forward but helping where she could, and so encouraging the growth of a company of believers who stood with Paul when they first responded to the message, and then continued in partnership with him for years to follow. See **Philippians 4:15-20**.

‘Jezebel’

That will not have been her real name, but it is the nickname that the glorified Lord Jesus gave to her when he sent his letter to the church in Thyatira (**Revelation 2:18-29**). This was a really effective church, and the Lord set his seal of approval on them: “I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.” Wouldn’t we all love to be part of a church like that, knowing that we were making such good progress together and being approved so clearly by the Lord Jesus?

BUT . . . ! Not all was going right in that fellowship. They were too easy-going in one particular way. We might find that surprising; why should the Lord Jesus criticise them for being too tolerant?

There was one person in their midst who had been given too much free rein and (forgive the play on words) that had developed into free **reign**! She had taken control! The Lord gives this lady the nickname of Jezebel, an obvious reference to an infamous character in Old Testament history. More about her in a moment, but first let’s look at what must have happened for this disastrous situation to have developed.

Before reading any further, please be sure to read **Revelation 2:18-29**, where the tragic story is very concisely summarised, especially in **v.20**.

‘She **calls herself** a prophetess’. That should have rung alarm bells immediately. There is nothing to prevent any Christian believer – male or female – from bringing prophecy to the church – a ‘word from the Lord’. The apostle Paul was very clear about that in **1 Corinthians 11**. But I can find no record of any prophet of God in Old or New Testaments who **took upon themselves** the ‘title’ of prophet. The prophet Amos actively denied it!² As did John the Baptist, though the Lord Jesus was ready to confirm John as ‘more than a prophet’.³ But, at no little risk to themselves and their reputations, all prophets spoke out what the Lord had given them to say, and left it with their hearers to judge whether they were true prophets or not.⁴

Anyone who calls **themselves** a prophet is basically claiming that what they are saying is the word of God. This lady had found a way of manipulating some of the church members to do whatever she said: she just said that God had told her. And they were so ‘tolerant’ that they believed her unquestioningly!

Then she took it a stage further – actually, two stages. She started teaching the others to do things which they knew they should not do. Firstly, something directly and obviously wrong: sexual immorality. The implication is that she may have persuaded some of them to physically commit adultery with her, but there was certainly sexual sin there, one way or another. ‘Adultery’ is also used throughout the Bible as an expression of idolatry (i.e. unfaithfulness to the Lord) and ‘eating things offered to idols’ was a step in the wrong direction. Paul warned

¹ **Philippians 1:3-5**

² **Amos 7:14-15**

³ **John 1:21, Matthew 11:7-14, Luke 7:24-30**

⁴ Moses had given some simple and direct guidelines back in **Deuteronomy 18:17-22**.

about it in **1 Corinthians 8**, but maybe these folk in Thyatira were actually taking part in idol worship, not just eating the food offerings. So she was encouraging them into two types of adultery, sexual and spiritual.

Their 'tolerance' had allowed her to get away with teaching the church in the first place. They had allowed themselves to be fooled by her claim to being a prophetess and had embraced the false and dangerous teaching which she told them came from the Lord. They should have been 'judging' every so-called prophetic word, as Paul advocates in **1 Corinthians 14:29**.

So then she led them even further astray, into what they themselves called 'the deep things of Satan'. Incredibly, these were believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, not some Satanist sect!

What should they have done? Ideally, of course, not allowed themselves to be hoodwinked in the first place but, starting from where they are as they receive this letter from the Lord, there is one clear remedy: repentance. The Lord says that he has given her time to repent but that she refuses to do so. The Greek is very clear that she has determined **not** to repent, and it looks like there is no way back for her now. The judgment that is coming to her does not say 'if she doesn't repent'. He has given her time to repent and she has not done so. Her judgment seems certain.

Those who have followed her still have the opportunity to escape that judgment, if **they** repent. They need to have a radical change of mind about all the things that they have allowed her to lead them into. Most unusually, they are asked to repent of **her** deeds! Why? Because they have allowed themselves to be pulled into **her** deception, **her** immorality and **her** idolatry. They need to see clearly that what she has been leading them into is wrong, completely at odds with the Lord's purposes for them, and then turn very definitely against all of it.

Amazingly – and happily – there are apparently some there in that fellowship who have not got involved with 'Jezebel'. They have refused her twisted leadership and have continued their love, faith, service and perseverance. Their recent actions are even better than before. Just imagine what it will have been like for those faithful ones in that fellowship. They will have gone against the general opinion and rejected Jezebel's 'leadership' and 'prophecy'. They will probably have been accused of disloyalty and divisiveness because they refused to go along with the others! But they didn't split off, despite the horrendous practices which their fellow-believers were following. 'Hang on in there' says the Lord, and the promises to those 'overcomers' are closely linked to their having an active part in the establishing of his future kingdom on the earth. They have stood against the power of Satan inside the church and will share directly in the Lord's authority over the nations when his kingdom is established on earth.

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Perhaps we wonder why the Lord chose to call this woman 'Jezebel'? Let's turn back about 950 years. King David had died about 120 years earlier, and Solomon about 40 years after that. Almost immediately after Solomon's death, Jeroboam leads a massive rebellion against the 'house of David' and 10 tribes separate themselves, setting up their new kingdom called 'Israel' under Jeroboam, initially based in the city of Shechem and then later in Samaria. David's successors continue in Jerusalem, reigning over the kingdom of Judah, which includes the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and Levites connected to the temple worship.

Less than 60 years later, after 7 disastrous kings over 'Israel', Ahab comes to the throne. Jeroboam had been bad enough, immediately abandoning worship of the LORD and setting up 2 golden calves in Dan and Bethel, plus instituting a whole new system of idol worship. His successors had continued in the same way, but Ahab *'did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him. It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for*

him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshipped him.' Jezebel achieved the almost impossible: she made a bad king even worse. (See **1 Kings 16:29-34**)

Not long after Ahab came to the throne of 'Israel', Elijah the prophet of the LORD came on the scene. Probably the most well-known account of Elijah is the showdown which he had with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in **1 Kings 18**. There had been 3 years of drought and Jezebel had tried to eliminate all the 'prophets of the LORD' (though Obadiah had managed to rescue 100 of them¹). Elijah proved that the LORD was the true and living God, the prophets of Baal were totally discredited and were then executed. Jezebel was furious and promised to kill Elijah.² She did not succeed.

'Thus says the LORD' was the hallmark of all the Old Testament prophets, but Elijah went a stage further and customarily declared 'As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand . . . ' and then delivered the words which the LORD had given him. Elisha, his successor, and also Micaiah the prophet, took up the same words.³ Ahab and Jezebel served idols, but Elijah served the living God, responded to him and faithfully passed on his words.

Not only was Jezebel determined to kill Elijah and any other prophets of the LORD whom she could find, she also cultivated idol worship with at least 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah⁴. She corrupted Ahab even more and arranged the murder of Naboth, whose land Ahab wanted, by setting up false accusations against him.⁵

In short, Jezebel was not simply a non-believer in the LORD, she was totally opposed to all that the LORD wanted to do with his people, repeatedly turned her husband Ahab the king against the LORD and his prophets, and caused years of trouble for the kingdom of 'Israel' through their two sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, who reigned after Ahab. It was recorded of Jehoram that 'he did evil in the sight of the LORD, though not like his father and his mother'⁶. Ahab and Jezebel had set an all-time low for Israel. They took the ten tribes even further down the road of idolatry and disobedience to the LORD, with the result that those ten tribes were permanently removed from the LORD's sight. In other words, they were written out of history, never to be seen again. See **2 Kings 17:6-23**.

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This is the woman to whom the glorified Lord Jesus compares the false prophetess of Thyatira. Just as judgment fell on Jezebel and all the kingdom of 'Israel', so the Lord Jesus pronounces judgment on her and all who have followed her.

And all this because of the wrong sort of 'tolerance', accepting teaching and 'words from the Lord' without testing them, and allowing themselves to be drawn into actions which they knew were wrong. Fortunately, not all the believers in Thyatira had been drawn away.

Lydia? Or Jezebel? A warning and encouragement to us all!

Dave Taylor August 2025

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk

¹ **1 Kings 18:3-4**

² **1 Kings 19:1-2**

³ **1 Kings 17:1, 18:15, 22:14, 2 Kings 3:14, 5:16**

⁴ **1 Kings 18:19**

⁵ **1 Kings 21:1-16**

⁶ **2 Kings 3:2**