

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

SESSION THREE: SMYRNA – FAITHFULNESS IN SUFFERING

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Revelation 2:8-11 To the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'"

I. THE PRIMARY MESSAGE

The church of Smyrna was a persecuted church. Jesus called them to fearlessness and faithfulness that would require some of them to die for their faith. He honored them for their enduring persecution and financial poverty. He told them that more persecution was coming but promised them the crown of life.

II. THE CHURCH OF SMYRNA

- A. Smyrna was a large harbor city on the Aegean Sea (west coast of modern Turkey) with over 100,000 residents. It continues today as the city of Izmir with a population of about 200,000. This heavily persecuted city is the only city of the seven mentioned in Rev. 2-3, that still exists today. Satan could not stamp out their testimony. It was one of the most beautiful cities in Asia being referred to in the ancient world as “the Crown of Asia” or “the Flower of Asia.” It was a prosperous harbor with many roads connecting it to the major cities of Asia.
- B. All were required by law to worship at a pagan temple. The most prominent were the temples to Zeus and the goddess Cybele. Emperor worship was a unifying factor in the Roman Empire. Once a year, all were required to burn incense on an altar for Caesar. Christians who refused to participate in this were considered criminals of the state. They were burned at the stake or killed by wild beasts. There was a large influential Jewish population who persecuted the church.
- C. The name “Smyrna” is derived from the word “myrrh,” which is symbolic for bitter suffering throughout the Scripture, especially in the Song of Solomon. It’s an amazing touch of the sovereign grace of God that would place the suffering Church in the city with that name.

III. JESUS’ REVELATION OF HIMSELF

⁸ ***These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life... (Rev. 2:8)***

- A. ***The First and the Last*** – refers back to Rev. 1:17-18 and is mentioned seven times, three in Isaiah and four in Revelation (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12; Rev. 1:8, 17; 2:8; 22:13). In Revelation 22:13, this designation is parallel to His title as “Alpha and Omega,” equaling the designation of the Father in Revelation 1:11. He is the “First” source of all blessing and is the “Last” to stand. This assures us that all His promises will come to pass. The beginning and end of the His plan for our life are in His loving powerful hands.

- B. ***Jesus was dead, and came to life*** – to a church with martyrs, Jesus revealed Himself as a man who died but conquered death. Jesus as the eternal God “came to be dead;” He became a man who purposefully embraced the pain of death and is One with the power over it. He experienced the worst that men and Satan can do and triumphed over it. Jesus understands what His people go through.

IV. AFFIRMATION FOR FAITHFULNESS

⁹ ***I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (Rev. 2:9)***

- A. ***I know your works and tribulation*** – Jesus saw their labors in ministry in the midst of on-going tribulation or persecution especially by the Jews.
- B. ***I know your poverty*** – the persecution caused them to lose business opportunities as well as their property, leaving many of them in financial poverty.
³² ***You endured a great struggle with sufferings: 33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated...34 and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. (Heb. 10:32-34)***
- C. Scripture teaches us to expect persecution (Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22).
¹² ***All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. (2 Tim. 3:12)***
- D. The End-Time persecution will greatly affects finances.
¹⁶ ***He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, 17 and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. (Rev. 13:16-17)***
- E. Jesus will show forth His ownership over gold in the End-Times as He transfers wealth.
⁷ ***“I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations (Jesus)...8 The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,” says the LORD of hosts. (Hag. 2:7-8)***
- F. ***But you are rich*** – this is God’s declaration over this church – they were spiritually rich in God. In Lk. 12, Jesus taught a parable about the foolishness of neglecting to acquire riches in God. They were spiritually rich though financially poor (1 Pet. 1:6; 4:13-14). This poverty was a direct result of the persecution they suffered. Smyrna was a poor-yet- rich church whereas Laodicea was a rich-yet-poor church (Rev. 3:17).
²¹ ***He who lays up treasure for himself...is not rich toward God. (Lk. 12:21)***
- G. Poverty is not a sign of spirituality. However, often the poor are more desperate to follow and the rich continue to find it harder to enter the Kingdom initially as well as in the deeper aspects of it.
⁵ ***Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith...? (Jas 2:5)***

¹⁰ *As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing yet possessing all things. (2 Cor 6:10)*

²³ *Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter (initially and progressively) the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. (Mt. 19:23-24)*

- H. *I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not* – Jesus was aware of the Jewish people who claimed to be God’s chosen and to honor His Word but in reality served Satan. The apostle Paul was like one of these Jews but God showed him mercy (1 Tim. 1:13).
- I. *The synagogue of Satan* – they denied Jesus’ divinity and resurrection and considered His miracles as being done by Satan. Jesus referred to this as blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:24-32). A synagogue of Satan is one which actively persecutes worshippers of Jesus. Some were Jews from the seed of Abraham physically but were spiritually of Satan.
- ⁴⁴ *You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. (Jn. 8:44)*
- ³² *Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him... (Mt. 12:32)*

V. CORRECTION FOR COMPROMISE – NONE

- A. Jesus gave no rebuke to this church because in pressure they remained faithful. Only two of the seven churches in Rev. 2-3, have no correction (Smyrna and Philadelphia). In their trials they remained pure in belief and behavior.
- B. It is noteworthy that the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia were the only ones that received no correction and were also the only ones afflicted by a “synagogue of Satan.”
- C. Imagine the joy of having Jesus speak directly to us as a Body, and having no word of correction to bring to us. Holy Spirit, encounter us now with what we need to hear, that we might stand blameless on that day!

Colossians 1:9-12 . . . pray for you, . . . that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; (10) that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (11) strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; (12) giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.

VI. EXHORTATION TO RESPOND

¹⁰ *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death... (Rev. 2:10)*

- A. ***The devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested*** – Jesus wanted them to know that some would face prison and even death. Jesus said it would happen to prepare them. They were imprisoned for refusing to worship the Emperor as God. History tells us that Jews reported Christians to the Roman authorities as being criminals of Rome.
- ¹ These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble, ² They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service....⁴ These things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them... (Jn. 16:1-4)***
- B. This persecution is clearly the work of Satan. Satan inspired evil men to imprison some of them to tempt them to draw back from their faithfulness to Jesus. Satan worked behind the scenes with these apostate Jews to imprison Christians. God allowed Satan to do this as He allowed Job to be tested (Job 1). Even John the Baptist was put into prison by men inspired by Satan.
- C. The Lord delivers some from prison like Peter (Acts 5:19; 12:7-11), yet allows some others to die in prison like James and John the Baptist (Mk. 6:27; (Acts 12:2). Paul was imprisoned and delivered then imprisoned again (Acts 16:24-27; 22:4; 26:10; 2 Cor.11:23).
- D. Jesus allows imprisonment of His servants to magnify His testimony through their faithfulness. It tests the depth of one's love for Jesus and thus openly proves the worthiness of Jesus to them.
- ⁶ Now for a little while...you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, (1 Pet. 1:6-7)***
- ⁴⁰ They had called for the apostles and beaten them...⁴¹ They departed...rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. (Acts 5:40-41)***
- E. ***Be faithful until death*** – there will be many with the grace of martyrdom in the End-Times. The Church must be established in the NT theology of martyrdom. Satan overcomes many saints physically in martyrdom yet in this they overcome him spiritually by victorious love for Jesus.
- ⁷ It was granted (by God) to him (Antichrist) to make war with the saints and to overcome them (physically through martyrdom). Authority was given him over every...nation (Rev. 13:7)***
- ¹¹ They (martyred saints) overcame him (Antichrist) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. (Rev. 12:11)***
- ² I saw...those who have the victory over the Beast (Antichrist)...having harps... (Rev. 15:2)***
- F. ***You will have tribulation ten days*** – this can be taken both literally and prophetically. Some point to the literal ten day period of the gladiatorial contests in which Christians were thrown to the wild beasts. There is nothing in the text that leads us to interpret the number ten in a symbolic way. Some see this as prophetically speaking of the ten periods of persecutions under the Roman Emperors (from Nero to Diocletian) in which Christians suffered great persecution. The length of their trial was ten days. In other words, it was short in comparison with eternal blessings.

- G. ***Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer*** – They did not need to fear death because they would live forever. Giving place to fear causes us to turn to idols (short-term sources of comfort), instead of trusting the One who conquered death, who loves us and will deliver us.

Isaiah 57:13 When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you. But the wind will carry them all away, a breath will take them. But he who puts his trust in Me shall possess the land, and shall inherit My holy mountain."

Matthew 10:28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

VII. PROMISE FOR OVERCOMERS

¹⁰ ***Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says...He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death. (Rev. 2:10-11)***

- A. ***I will give you the crown of life*** – this is not the same as the gift of eternal life that all born again believers receive by faith. This is a special reward specifically for enduring persecution that results in enabling one to experience more of God’s glory (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

¹⁶ ***Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory... (2 Cor. 4:16-17)***

- B. Each believer will experience varying measures of God’s life (presence) in the age to come. God’s Eternal Life has an infinite measure of glory. The crown of life refers to experiencing fuller dimensions of God’s life or glory. The crown of life parallels the tree of life (Rev.2:7).
- C. In our resurrected body we will all have different spiritual capacities and abilities.
⁴¹ ***There is one glory of the sun...another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory. 42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. (1 Cor. 15:41-42)***
- D. God will only give the crown of life to believers who are approved as worthy of it. This crown is not related to salvation but to our place of function in His Kingdom (government/infrastructure).
¹² ***Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved (found consistent), he will receive the crown of life...promised to those who love Him. (Jas 1:12)***
- E. There are nine NT references to the crown that a believer may receive from the Lord. Twice the crown is referred to with the descriptive title the “crown of life” (Jas 1:12, Rev 2:10); once the “crown of righteousness” (2 Tim. 4:8); and once the “crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4). The different titles probably refer to different nuances of the same reward (1 Cor. 9:5, Rev 3:11, 4:8).

- F. This eternal reward included the increased capacity to experience and impart God’s life (zoe), glory or the anointing of the Spirit. The authority to impart God’s life or anointing in our ministry to others in the age-to-come is an aspect of the crown of life. There will be great joy in having the grace to participate in ministry assignments that are especially near and dear to Jesus.
- G. There are two Greek words describing two different types of crowns in the New Testament. One is the crown of a ruler (Gr. diadem), the other is the crown of a victor (Gr., stephanos) who won a race in the Greek athletic games. The Greek word “stephanos” is used in Jas 1:12. Crowns of authority are only given to those who endure in resisting temptation until the end.
- ¹⁰ ***Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10)***
- ¹¹ ***Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. (Rev. 3:11)***
- H. We must see the relationship of being challenged by our hardships to receiving eternal rewards.
- ¹⁶ ***Our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed...¹⁷ For our affliction ...is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory... (2 Cor. 4:16-17)***
- ¹⁸ ***For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. (Rom. 8:18)***
- ⁶ ***You have been grieved by trials, ⁷ that the genuineness of your faith...though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ... (1 Pet. 1:6-7)***
- I. ***He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death*** – the second death is separation from God in the lake of fire forever (Rev. 20:1, 14). To overcome is to remain faithful in persecution. The saints were hurt relationally, financially and physically by staying faithful to Jesus. Jesus assured them that although the first death ‘hurt’ them briefly, the second death will not hurt them at all!”
- J. On the most terrifying day when the second death is administered, all will see that the works done in faithful love for Jesus are safe. This is when persecutors will see the fullness of what they lost by persecuting the Church.
- K. The Judgment Seat of Christ and then the second death show forth the “great reversal” in history when righteousness is seen as wise and valuable and sin is seen as a terrible waste of life. Jesus assures those persecuted that they were not in jeopardy of suffering any permanent loss. It is better to suffer the first death as a martyr, than to suffer the second death.
- L. The second death is mentioned four times (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). The first death is the death of our physical body. The spirit of the unbeliever goes to Sheol (Hebrew) or Hades (Greek).