

Jesus' Letter To The Church At Smyrna

Text : **Revelation 2: 8-11**

INTRODUCTION :

A. We are studying the simplest section of the most misunderstood book in N.T.

1. It is a book that was written to seven specific churches forewarning them of persecutions that would soon come upon them.
2. It was written in a code language to prevent their persecutors from understanding it.
3. The purpose of the book was to reassure the Christians that though things were about to get very bad for them, they would ultimately receive the promised reward.

B. This section of The Revelation evaluates each of the seven receiving churches.

1. The Apostle Paul establishes the church in Ephesus and the others came from it.

Acts 19: 9b-10 ... he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

2. This area had a abundance of teaching.
 - a. The Apostle Paul was in that area longer than anywhere else.
 - b. Aquila and Priscilla taught there. (*converted Apollos there*)
 - c. Timothy taught there for some years.
 - d. The Apostle John was there for many years.

C. Though the seven churches grew out of the Ephesian church, they were not carbon copies of each other.

1. Each grew and developed in different circumstances and environments.
2. Since the church is made up of people, the attitudes of the people affect the church.
3. Even today, every congregation develops its own unique personality.
 - a. Everything that affects the thinking of the members affects the church's personality.
 - b. The socioeconomic status of the members affects the church. (*blue or white collar*)

D. The church at Ephesus stayed active and became a strong defender of truth, but they lost their loving spirit while doing so. (*Missed most important thing.*)

1. They had been a very loving church (**Eph. 1:15**), but were no longer so.
2. They were warned that they were no longer acceptable to God and needed to repent.
3. Their failure to repent resulted in their being removed as a church of Christ / God.

With this lesson we will examine the letter which Jesus wrote to the church in Smyrna.

I. We start by looking at the city of Smyrna.

*** All of this description of the city is relevant to understanding what Jesus wrote to Smyrna and why the events would come to pass.**

A. The culture in which this church functioned is of particular significance.

1. Though the city of Smyrna was only 35 miles north of Ephesus, but it was a world away.
2. Ephesus gloried in its goddess and the temple they had built to her.
- *3. Of all the cities in Asia, Smyrna had more municipal pride than any other.

B. Smyrna was known as the most beautiful city in Asia.

1. It was called such things as :
 - a. *"The ornament of Asia."*
 - b. *"The crown of Asia"*
 - c. *"The flower of Asia"*
2. It was praised by ancient authors.
 - a. The novelist, Lucian describes it as : *"The fairest city of Iconia."*
 - c. The Greek philosopher, Apollonius of Tyana described it as: *"The most beautiful city under the sun."*
3. It's coins described it as : "First In Asia In Beauty & In Size"

C. Its setting added to its beauty.

1. It is located at the end of a long narrow inlet in the sea.
2. It is built on the slopes of the foothills above the harbor.
3. At the top it was crowned by the **"The Golden Street."** (*Mt. Pagus*)
 - a. Often referred to as the "Crown of Smyrna."
 - b. It was lined with temples to a host of pagan gods.
4. It was one of the few planned cities in the ancient world. (*wide, straight streets*)

D. Smyrna told great pride in being a cultural center.

1. It had a famous stadium.
2. It had the largest public theater in Asia.
3. It had a music hall.
4. Its library was as famous as its stadium.

E. Like Ephesus, Smyrna was a commercially important city.

1. It had a small, but highly desirable harbor. (*coin found with ship on it*)
 - a. It was a deep water port.
 - b. The harbor was at the back of an inlet so it was sheltered from storms.
 - c. Because the harbor was in a narrow inlet, it was easily defended. (*chained*)
2. Located in the Hermus river valley, it got all of the trade from the valley.
3. Thus, Smyrna was an exceptionally wealthy city.

F. Smyrna was extremely important politically.

1. It was highly favored by the Roman government and extremely loyal.
2. It was a “free city” and an “assize city.”

G. Smyrna has an interesting history which molded its worldview.

1. Founded about 1000 B.C. as a Greek colony. (*Still exists today as Izmir, Turkey.*)
2. It was destroyed by the Lydians about 600 B.C. and remained decimated for 400 yrs.
3. About 200 B.C. the city was rebuilt by Lysimachus. (*Alexander's cavalry General*)
(*Why one of the few planned cities in the ancient world.*)
4. Before any other in Asia, Smyrna cast its lot with Rome remained a loyal ally.

H. All of the foregoing information is important to understanding why the church in Smyrna was to endure particularly devastating persecution, but this relationship with Rome is the most important factor.

1. Smyrna had benefited greatly from “*Pax Roma*” and they were very grateful.
2. In 195 B.C. they built a temple to worship the goddess Roma.
3. In 26 A.D. they built a temple to worship Emperor Tiberius. (*permitted outside Rome*)
 - a. Emperor Caligula (37-41 A.D.) was the first to demand veneration as a god.
 - b. Nero also claimed to be a god.
 - c. Emperor Domitian demanded to be worshipped under penalty of death.
- *4. In Smyrna they fanatically enforced Domitian's decree because they had already been practicing emperor worship. (*Offer pinch of incense and say, Caesar is..*)

II. Vs. 8 ... Jesus identifies Himself to the church in Smyrna.**A. He called Himself “the first and the last.”**

1. There was nothing before Me and there will be nothing after Me.

2. The O.T. uses the same language is used to describe God.

Isa. 44: 6- Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer,
the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last,
And there is no God besides Me.

3. Thus, Jesus has told them that He is :

- a. Eternal
- b. He is the all-powerful God of the universe.

B. He then explains that He “Was dead and has come to life” (*compare chapter 1*)

1. He has the power over life. (*Satan cannot kill Him so He cannot be defeated.*)
2. He has the power to restore life to them AFTER they are slain for their faith.

III. Vs. 9 ... He tells them that He is aware of their suffering. (*cf.- Matt 28:20*)

A. Jesus not only knew their circumstances, He empathized with them.

1. Jesus was tempted in all things as we are. (**Heb. 4:15**)
2. Having done no wrong, Jesus was crucified for the sins of others.
3. Jesus is the one who is walking among the churches so He remains aware of ALL.

B. He was aware of their tribulation, of their affliction.

1. This word literally means : pressing together, pressure
2. It stems from a torture where they put increasing amount of pressure on one's chest.
3. Jesus is aware of every burden that every church and that every Christian bears.
4. When the weight of the world bears down on your shoulders, Jesus knows & cares.

I Pet. 5: 6-7 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God,
that He may exalt you at the proper time, ⁷ casting all your anxiety
on Him, because He cares for you.

5. Society demonizes those it persecutes to make their persecution more acceptable.

** Some ways the early Christians were demonized were that they were accused of :*

- a. Cannibalism : The Lord's Supper symbolize the body and blood of Jesus
- b. Immoral : They have meals together called “Love Feasts.”
- c. Incest : They called each other brother and sister.
- d. Arson : They taught the world would end in fire. (*Credence to Nero's accusation*)
- e. Destroyers of families : Not all members of families accepted Christ.
- f. Atheists : They rejected the pagan gods and idol worship.
- g. Rebels : They refused to sacrifice to the Emperor or to call him lord.

*6. **Even today ...** true Christians are still maligned in many ways :

- a. Intolerant
- b. Hate mongers
- c. Homophobes
- e. Radicals
- f. Fanatic, extremists
- g. *Today ... in some countries Christians are being killed.*

*-- **The more secular our society becomes the more we will be maligned. STAND**

7. Opposition and persecution is nothing new; we have been forewarned to expect it.

a. **II Tim. 3: 12-** ... all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

b. **John 3:20 -** For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

(You are the light. **Matt. 5: 14** -cf- We must expose sin. **Eph 5: 11**)

c. Jesus warned us that serving Him would make us unpopular.

John 16:2- ... an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God. (Cf- **Saul ... Acts 26: 9-11**)

C. Jesus was also aware of their poverty. (...)

1. This word translated "**Poverty**" (*ptocheia*) means destitute, beggary, in need.

- a. It is not just the absence of luxuries.
- b. We Americans define poverty as not having a new car and a wide screen TV.

2. These brethren were suffering great poverty in the presence of great wealth.

3. During persecution Christians were stripped of their earthly possessions.

a. **Heb. 10: 32-36** But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³ partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.

³⁴ For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. ³⁵ Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.\

b. Compare : **I Cor. 4:9, Matt. 5:11-12, 10: 16-42**

c. *Today Christianity can still cost us jobs, additional taxes because we don't cheat.*

D. Jesus was aware of the evil being done to Christians by the Jews in Smyrna.

1. There was a large, rich and influential Jewish community in Smyrna.

2. The Jews had become the church, the assembly of Satan.
3. Satan is a spirit so he works through people.
 - a. He worked through Peter. ... **Mark 8: 33**
 - b. He worked through Judas. ... **John 13: 27**
 - *c. *Satan can work through you or those close to you.*

IV. Vs. 10 Jesus admonishes the church to endure their suffering with faith.

A. He tells them not to fear.

1. He presented Himself as the all-powerful, eternal God.
2. He had told them He was the one who had the power over death.
3. Fear will cause one to renounce his faith and lose his eternal reward. Vs. 11
 - a. Demas feared and fled ... **II Tim. 4: 10**
 - b. Jesus warned that to hang on to this life would cost one eternal life. **Luke 9: 23-27**
4. Fear is a mortal sin : **Rev. 21:8- But the fearful, ... shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.**

B. Some of them were going to be killed for their faith.

1. Roman prisons were for those awaiting trial or punishment. (*prison wasn't to punish*)
2. Those who refused to sacrifice to the Emperor were put to death as traitors.
3. Jesus admonished Christians in Smyrna not to recant their faith to save their lives.

* The death of a faithful Christian is a victory over Satan.

Rev. 12: 11- And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.

CONCLUSION :

- A. Vs. 10b ..Their tribulation was a test which lasts for a period of time. (10=**complete**)
 1. Satan tests Christians hoping to destroy us.
 2. God uses tests to strengthen and to show one to be approved.
- B. All who remain faithful through the period of testing will receive a crown.
 1. "*stephanos*" victor's wreath. *Our prize is not a wreath, our crown is eternal life.*
 2. God's crown is given to all who cross the finish line, **who don't surrender their faith.**
- C. Challenge to emulate the faith of Bro. Polycarp. (**Tell story of his martyrdom.**)

INVITATION :

Lesson Text :**Revelation 1: 10-11**

10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like *the sound* of a trumpet, **11** saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send *it* to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

Revelation 1: 17-20

17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, **18** and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. **19** Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. **20** As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

Revelation 2: 8-11

8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: **9** 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. **10** 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for 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 will not be hurt by the second death.'

Polycarp was a friend and student of the Apostle John. He was martyred in 155 a.d. when Statius Quadratus was proconsul of Asia Minor. He was the most prominent elder of the church in Smyrna, a respected teacher and writer. He was 86 years old when he was martyred. When they came to arrest him for being a Christian, he did not run, but invited his captors in and fed them. He requested only that they given him one hours to pray alone and undisturbed.

When taken before the proconsul they pleaded with Polycarp to just say the words "Caesar is Lord." but he refused saying, "Eighty and six years I have served Him from whom I have received nothing but love and mercy, how can I blaspheme the one who saved me." Rather than yield to their admonitions to deny Christ, he offered to teach them the gospel. When they threatened him with fire, he replied, that they threatened him with a fire that would go out in an hour, but they knew nothing of the judgment of God upon the ungodly which would last forever. The crowd (including many Jews) adamantly cried out for him to be burned at the stake.

When his executioners were about to nail him to the stake to be burned alive, he told them there was no need to nail him that he would stand there and burn. As they were about to light the fire he thanked God to be allowed to suffer for Him. When his bonds burned free, he again raised his hands in prayer so they pierced him with a sword to hasten his death and the Jews violated their Sabbath by carrying extra bundles of wood to heap upon the fire which consumed the elder.