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Jesus' Letters to Seven Asian Churches - Revelation 2:1-3:22
Part 2 of 7: Smyrna - Revelation 2:8-11

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In the first installment of this seven part series we recounted how, late in the First Century AD, the aged Apostle John was exiled on the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Patmos lies off the coast of the Roman province of Asia (now eastern Turkey). While languishing there, one "Lord's day," John was suddenly visited by a vision of the resurrected Lord Jesus in His divine majesty. The Lord told His faithful friend to listen to the words He dictated to him and to record the marvelous visions he was going to see. John did as he was instructed and composed what became the book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse.

In what became the second and third chapters of that book, the Lord dictated seven letters of commendations and/or warnings to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. They were each one addressed to the angel of the church. We surmised in part one that the "angel" (messenger) referred to the pastor of each church. The pastors were responsible for reading the letters aloud, along with the rest of Revelation, to their individual congregations, and then passing them to the other cities. Installment one analyzed Christ's letter to the Ephesian church. To read part one, the letter to the Ephesians, go here:

<http://www.marketfaith.org/2024/02/jesus-letters-to-seven-asian-churches-part-1-ephesus-tal-davis>.

Now we turn to the second church to whom Jesus wrote; the church at Smyrna.

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 slander 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 throw 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 The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.' (NASB)

The city of Smyrna was a large and beautiful metropolis about forty miles due north of Ephesus at the mouth of the Hermus River. It was a wealthy cosmopolitan city that was a center for science, medicine, and education. Surrounded by rich farmland and having a good harbor, its inhabitants bragged it was the "First City" of Asia. It is thought by some that its name was derived from myrrh, a perfume used in oils and embalming. The original city was destroyed in 580 BC but restored in 290 BC by Lysimachus, a military officer of Alexander the Great. The restoration was beautifully landscaped and featured ornate architecture.

Smyrna was an ally of Rome even before Asia was annexed into the empire in 133 BC. Thus, because of that historic relationship, it enjoyed the imperial status as a "free city," meaning it was essentially self-governed. In John's day, late in the first century AD, it was also renowned as a center for Roman emperor worship. In AD 23, a temple had been built to honor the second emperor, Tiberius (he ruled AD 14 - AD 37). Later emperors were also honored that way.

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The believers' lives in Smyrna were not so pleasant. Both Jews and Christians were persecuted by the Romans for refusing to bow to the emperor's image and utter, "Caesar is Lord." The Jews, however, in turn, persecuted the Christians. Some Christians, however, were Jewish themselves and still wanted to be included in that community's life. But they were boycotted for believing in Jesus as Messiah. So into that difficult environment the Lord speaks His words to the church.

In verse eight, after addressing it to Smyrna's angel, the risen Christ begins his letter by calling Himself the First and the Last (Rev. 1:17). Elsewhere in Revelation, He declares Himself "the Alpha and the Omega" (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). Both those titles clearly express His unqualified identification with the God of the Hebrews (see Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). He is the One True God who created the universe and sovereignly presides over it. Though the Smyrnaeans thought their city was "First" in Asia, actually Christ was "First" in everything. Thus, the church could rest in the knowledge that they were in His omnipotent hands.

The Lord also identifies Himself as the one who was dead, and has come to life. The people in Smyrna might have interpreted this phrase in light of the city's history of destruction and restoration. In any case, it is obviously a reference to Christ's resurrection from the dead and the fact He lives forever (Rev. 1:18). What a comfort to the faithful believers in Smyrna who faced the very real prospect of persecution and even death. Jesus, too, had suffered and died, but death does not have the final word with Him, with them, or with us!

In the next, verse nine, the omniscient Lord says he knows three

traumatic crises the Smyrnaean church was facing. First, He knows their tribulation. Tribulation, sometimes translated affliction, is the burdensome and painful attacks they endured from their various enemies in the city. The Romans, for one, made their lives difficult because they would not participate in the emperor cult that dominated the city culture.

Second, the Lord knows their poverty. Because of their faith the Smyrnaean Christians were experiencing prejudice and economic boycotts by the pagan citizens of the city. The economic strain was taking its toll on them. They lived in one of the richest cities in that part of the world, yet they were seriously lacking in the basic necessities of life.

Nonetheless, the Lord declares that they are actually rich. In God's economy wealth does not derive from the value or amount of one's possessions. Genuine richness is in the spiritual quality of their dependence on God to meet their needs. Jesus had warned His disciples, "Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because one's life is not in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). He also advised them, "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal" (Matt. 6:20). The things of this world are fading fast, but the reality of the riches in heaven has no end.

Finally, the Lord says He is aware of the slander, or blasphemy, they received from those in the town claiming to be Jewish. Jesus, however, alleges that they are not authentic Jews at all, but frauds. In fact he calls them a synagogue of Satan. The synagogue was the gathering place of local Jewish men to study and worship. In this case, they were slandering the Christians in Smyrna so the Lord asserts they are not really Jews at all, but an assembly doing Satan's bidding. Sa-

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tan, of course, is the evil one, the accuser, and the adversary of God. They may have had the right ethnic Hebrew pedigree, but the Lord contends that being a true Jew was more than a matter of outward membership in a race or of practicing legalistic religiosity.

The Apostle Paul affirmed the same principle when he talked about keeping the Law. "For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart – by the Spirit, not the letter. That person's praise is not from people but from God" (Rom. 2:28-29). God judges the inner spiritual reality of one's faith in Christ, not one's heritage, nationality, race, or gender.

Up to this point the exalted speaker has uttered no criticism or warnings to the Smyrnaean Christians. And, unlike the Ephesians and most of the other churches in Asia, the Lord Jesus never admonishes them for allowing false teaching, being apathetic, or behaving badly. Apparently, they were faithfully doing everything the Lord expected of His people. That did not mean the Lord was not fully aware of their serious problems.

The Lord had already indicated His knowledge of the stress they labored under because of the Jewish imposters in the synagogue of Satan. Between them and the pagan emperor worshiping Romans, things were getting dangerous for the Smyrnaean believers. The Lord knew, and so did they, that troubled times were coming. The persecutions and violence against them was certain to get worse.

Nonetheless, the Lord tells them in verse ten, Do not fear what you are about to suffer. The sure prospect of

suffering naturally made the Smyrnaeans fearful. Fear is a powerful emotion and can paralyze a person to shut down. Veterans of war often testify that fear was their constant companion. A Marine veteran of World War II once remarked about landing on Iwo Jima, "If you say you weren't scared, you either weren't there or you're a liar!" The Lord definitely knew how the Smyrnaean church members felt and the crises they faced. Nevertheless, He does not promise them the afflictions will be alleviated quickly, in fact, quite the contrary. He just does not want them to be paralyzed with fear.

The Lord then warns them, Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison. Obviously, He did not mean that the devil himself would personally arrest and incarcerate them. That would be the unholy task of the Jewish deceivers and/or the tyrannical Romans. However, Christ does insinuate that they are unknowing puppets in the hands of the evil accuser doing his bidding. Satan will use whatever or whoever he can to try and destroy God's people, especially when they are faithful and effective to carry out the Lord's ministry.

So why is the Lord allowing this cruel detention to happen? He says it is so that you will be tested. It was a way for Christ to allow the Smyrnaeans to verify, not to Him, but to themselves, that their faith was genuine. It will reveal the extent of their faith, the intensity of their loyalty to Christ, and the depth of their love for Him. They had been faithful to Him through all they had endured to this point, but could they hold out as things deteriorated further?

Christ reveals a time period for the tribulation they will experience. He says it will last for ten days. The extent of that period may have meant an actual stretch of ten days, or per-

haps was the expression of a short stint of time. In either case, the Lord gave them warning of what was to come. The time would be short until the suffering would ameliorate. However, the cessation would not come necessarily with their exoneration or freedom. He says for them to be faithful until death. For many the end would come only with their violent demise.

That exhortation was not what they wanted to hear, but martyrdom for Christ is a dreaded reality for believers in every generation. Even in the current era millions of Christians around the world face persecution and murder. According to Open Doors International (ODI), a watchdog organization that monitors Christian persecution worldwide, 365 million Christians around the globe live in areas of high religious persecution. As recently as 2023 for instance, nearly 5,000 Christians were killed for their faith. Women and children are often victims of sexual violence and forced marriage. According to ODI's 2024 report of the 50 worst offender countries, 35 are predominantly Muslim, three are communist/atheist (China is especially cracking down on house churches), three are Buddhist, and two are Hindu. The worst of all is North Korea where being a believer in Jesus could be a one way ticket to the labor camps. (www.opendoors.org)

Though the situation looked grim, and death was a definite probability, the Lord gave them a magnificent promise. He assured them that if they remained faithful, He would give them the crown of life (see also James 1:12). The crown, in this case, was not a royal crown like a king, but a wreath of flowers placed on the heads of those who were victorious in battle or in athletic competition. That kind of crown was a common symbol in the New Testament for the victory Christ has won for those who trust Him and for blessings of salvation. It is used in numerous contexts: the crown of incorruption (1 Cor. 9:25); the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8); the crown of rejoicing (1 Thess. 2:19); and the crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4).

In verse eleven, once again, as He did with the Ephesians, and will do with the other five letters to the churches, the Lord concludes His message with the admonition, "The one who has an ear, let him hear." As we discussed in part one, the Lord is commanding His readers and listeners to pay close attention to what He is telling them. This is not just good advice, this is eternally significant truth. But, as we also stated, the ability to understand the truths behind each divinely inspired message required them to listen with divinely illuminated minds. That is why He says to listen, not just to His words, but what the Spirit says to the churches.

Spiritual truth is not learned by casually reading or analyzing the Bible. Only the spirit-filled believer in Christ has the supernatural capacity to perceive God's Word as revealed in the Scriptures. Unsaved people who do not have the Spirit living within them cannot really grasp the full meaning of the Bible. Their minds are dead to Divine Truth. As Paul explained to the Corinthians, "But the person without the Spirit (the natural unsaved person) does not receive what comes from God's Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated (discerned) spiritually" (1 Cor. 2:14).

This fact certainly does not mean there is no need for sound principles of biblical interpretation. Bible believers want to know what the words in Scripture actually meant to its inspired writers. Then the Spirit can illuminate their minds clearly and avoid distortion. Present-day Christians, more than any time in history, have access to innumerable aids to study the Bible. Many excellent translations, commentaries, dictionaries, cross references, concordances, and lexicons are available for use by serious students of Scripture.

And who is the Spirit addressing in the letters? The churches, of course. Keep in mind that, though each of the Lord's letters are addressed to individual congregations in Asia, they, and indeed all of Revelation, have application for all churches in all places and all times.

Finally, the risen Lord makes a somewhat puzzling promise to the Smyrnaeans. He declares that "The one who overcomes (that is the conqueror or victor) will not be hurt by the second death." The second death is the eternal destiny of the wicked following physical death and the final judgment. It will be a place of separation from the blessings and fellowship with God. Upon hearing that assurance, they will not suffer the second death. The listeners might naturally have wondered, "What is the first death?" The first death, unfortunately for them, especially in their situation, is physical death which He had already told them to bear faithfully. Since the Fall of Adam and Eve, humanity and the rest of creation has been subject to physical

decay. All living things, therefore, face the inevitability of death. In the dire persecution circumstances of the Smyrnaean church, that reality was likely to be their fate sooner rather than later.

So, the Lord assures them that, even though they may experience the first death as martyrs for their faith, they will not suffer the second death. "Not" in this sentence is an emphatic double negative, meaning something like, they will "never ever be hurt by the second death." The full implications of the second death are later revealed to John in his vision. Those believers who die in the Lord, when Jesus returns, will be resurrected to be with Him. "Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years" (Rev. 2:6).

Conversely, for those who die without receiving Christ as Savior, the future life will be eternal separation from God. Revelation states their destiny this way: "Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14-15, see also v. 21:8).

These and other passages describing eternal punishment (i.e. hell) are difficult for some people to accept (see: Matt. 18:9; 25:41,46; Jude 23; Heb. 10:27). They try to lessen their severe implications by reinterpreting them to mean the wicked are annihilated, or that eventually everyone will be saved. The Bible does not actually give us those options. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament are compelled, out of love, to tell the truth, no matter how unpleasant it may be. In any case, like the Smyrnaeans, those who trust Christ will never face that terrible prospect.

In the next installment, Part Three of this seven part series, we examine Jesus' letter to the angel of the church at Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17).

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