

Smyrna: Tried for the Faith
part 2
Rev. 2:8-11
05.03.16
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Well, welcome back!! Let me begin tonight with a question. If someone were to ask you your opinion about which American city is the most beautiful city out of all our cities, how would you answer that question? (and don't google it on your phone - this isn't a test). Which city holds this honor?

This is a difficult question for most people to answer, because our experience is limited to the few or the many cities we have visited, with the extra added ingredient of our own personal biases - but there are sources that help us answer this very question. On the web site TheCultureTrip.com, there is an article on the ten most beautiful cities in America - and according to this web site, the three cities topping the list are Charleston, S.C., St. Petersburg, Florida and San Francisco, California.

I have no opinion on St. Petersburg, Florida because I have never been there - but I have visited Charleston, S.C. and of course, San Francisco, and I can concur with the web site - Charleston and San Francisco are indeed beautiful cities, both in terms of their location, landscape, climate and architecture but also the cities history and culture. And if you have knowledge of either of these cities, then you will understand what I mean when I say that Smyrna was to first century Asia Minor what Charleston, S.C. or San Francisco are to 21st century America.

Smyrna, as a city, is alleged to have been the most beautiful city in Asia Minor in John's day - and there were several factors that earned Smyrna this title. In NT times Smyrna boasted a population of 200k people at least and was adorned by a spectacular thoroughfare named the Street of Gold, which curved around Mt. Pagus - which rose 500 feet above the city - and this street looked like a necklace around the neck of a goddess. In Smyrna there was also a temple at each end of this golden street - one to the goddess Cybele and another to Zeus; and there was a temple to the spirit of Rome; and it was these qualities that even coin inscriptions proclaimed Smyrna "First of Asia in Beauty and Size".

This was Smyrna - a city that was beautiful and cultured and known throughout Asia Minor as such. But Smyrna had another kind of jewel embedded in her midst - and that jewel was the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it was to the church located in this beautiful city that the glorified Christ sent His second letter, found in Revelation chapter two, verses eight to eleven. And in the same way letter to the church in Ephesus was a letter to a church which had good doctrine but lost devotion, Smyrna was a church which was poor by this worlds standards but rich and pure by Christ's standards - for Smyrna was a suffering church and was about to suffer in a greater way still - but the Smyrnaean church had stood firm in faith thus far, and Christ writes them to encourage them to persevere in faith, despite what is about to come upon them.

Now, if you were Jesus, what would you write to this church in order to encourage them to stand firm in faith? We don't have to guess at what Jesus would write, because in his short little four verse letter we know what he wrote to them. And we see **first**, *Jesus's greeting*, **followed** by his *title*, **followed** by his *commendation*, **followed** by his *encouragement* or *exhortation* and **then**, Jesus closes this short letter with a *precious promise*.

Jesus's greeting and title is found in verse 8 and we covered the greeting and the title two weeks ago. Do you remember what we said about verse eight and Jesus's greeting and title? The title Jesus gave to the church at Smyrna, identifying himself as "***the first and the last, who died and came back to life***".

Jesus had already used these very words when he spoke to John - and we have these words in 1: 17. Look there. **Question is**, WHY did Jesus choose this title for Himself as he wrote to this particular church? The title Jesus chose as He sent this letter to the Christians at Smyrna is related directly to what these Christians are facing and will face. And we learn what this church is about to face when we consider verses 9 and 10 and Jesus's commendation and His encouragement.

Remember, we said these letters follow a certain structure - and the structure that is found in each letter is generally the same. Each letter begins with:

- a) A greeting: "To the angel of the church in. . . ." followed by -
- b) A title of the Risen Christ, often taken from the vision of the risen Christ from chapter one; followed by -

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- c) The 'I Know' section, which give praise to the church for what is good and right (accept for Laodicea); next is -
- d) The 'but I have this against you' section, followed by;
- e) Warnings; followed by -
- f) An exhortation or encouragement; and then finally we have -
- g) A promise, given to 'him who overcomes'.

This is the general structure of the letters - but there are two exceptions - one of which is the letter to the church at Smyrna - and for this church, the letter contains the greeting, title, commendation, exhortation and promise - but lacks two items - there is no condemnation of behaviors for the church at Smyrna and there is no warning.

Commendation - the 'I know' portion of the letter is in *verse nine*. I know four particulars about your present situation. I know your:

- 1) works - their labor for Christ in worship and in witness - and ;
- 2) your tribulation - that is, the trials you face;
- 3) your poverty - and this is a reference to economic loss at the hands of people more influential than they and who could wield economic sanction against them; and Jesus knows about this; and he knows -
- 4) their enemies and their words against you (called 'blasphemies').

The specific enemies of the Christians at Smyrna are named - and Jesus calls them, "*those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan*". Who is referenced here? Those Jesus is referring to are Jews - but these Jews are **Unbelieving** Jews.

It is common knowledge that the first persecutions of Christians came at the hands of Jews who were hostile to the gospel. It was hostile Jewish leaders who had Christ put to death. It was the hostility of the Jewish rulers that saw Peter and John and others persecuted after Pentecost (see Acts 4 to 5). It was a group of Hellenistic Jews who killed Stephen, the first Christian martyr (see Acts 7 and 8); it was hostile Jews who brought about the beheading of James the Apostle (see Acts 12); and it was hostile Jews who were constantly chasing Paul around and persecuting him (Acts 13 to 23).

On this backdrop, Smyrna boasted the most numerous Jewish community of any city in Asia Minor at the end of the first century - and in Smyrna there were doing the same to the church at Smyrna that the the Apostle Paul had done to Christians before his conversion. It was this group Jesus refers to in verse nine. And in using the terms he uses in this ninth verse, Jesus identifies this group of Jewish persecutors using similar terms to those He used while he was ministering on earth , which we have recorded in John 8:44 ("***You are of your father the devil and the world of your father you do. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the turret because there is no truth in him. . .***").

These Jews in Smyrna were very wealthy AND they used their wealth to influence the city fathers against the church. Further, they controlled much of the commerce in Smyrna, according to the historical record - and this made it difficult for Christians to find employment - for this group of Jews were against Christ, against His Way and against His people the church.

Exhortation: Jesus's commendation is followed - not by a 'condemnation of behavior' and not with a 'warning and call to repentance' but rather, with an exhortation - and this is found in verse 10. Notice what Jesus tells these suffering Christians. To ears *untuned* to spiritual realities, Jesus's words sound insane - but to those whose ears are tuned, they bring comfort and assurance. He says:

"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 (or, unto death ESV), and I will give you the crown life." We need to understand four items in this exhortation:

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1st, notice who Jesus says will be behind the coming suffering. The suffering will come because Satan will do something against the church. What will he do? Throw some of them into jail.

2nd, we need to ask, How will he do this? Most likely, he will stir up some from what Jesus calls the 'synagogue of Satan' to rise up against the Christians. And this teaches us one of the dynamics of the warfare we are in as Jesus's followers and members of His kingdom, as over against the evil world kingdom.

Satan is ultimately behind murder, abortion, lying, all evil and especially behind the persecution of Christ's people; BUT, he works through human instruments most of the time. Now, the overarching dynamic of this is found in Revelation chapter 12 - where Satan is cast down from heaven and as a result is very angry and goes about making war on the saints for a time. But here, Jesus simply references what is about to happen, who will be responsible for it happening, and how long the tribulation will continue - ten days.

3rd, we see this trial will come to test these believers - and this gives insight into the purpose of trials in general. Trials come to test. What is tested? Our faith - and our faith is tested in order to determine whether it is genuine or not (see 1 Peter 1:6); and in order to refine it if it is genuine.

4th, we learn how this trial has a time limit - called ten days - and this reveals that it will take place over a specific amount of time and will then end. How long will the trial continue?

There are several interpretations of this number, ten, ranging from the number signifying a literal ten days - so three days longer than a week - to seeing it as symbolizing extreme and complete tribulation to seeing it as a reference to a ten year period (by those who hold to what is known as the '**year-for-a-day**' interpreters (known as historicists).

And for those who hold to the year-for-a-day view, some say that the church in Smyrna represents *the church during the period of the Roman persecutions - and there were ten major persecutions by Rome against the church, as we saw last week) while others would be more specific and see in the number ten the persecutions under the Roman ruler Diocletian, which lasted for a literal ten years.*

Which views right? I see it as either a literal ten days sometime in the future, or as an allusion to Daniel 1: 12-18, where Daniel and their friends requested they not have to eat from the king's table but be allowed to eat only vegetables and water for 'ten days' - and the ten days there is generally understood as a time period. Whichever way we take the number ten though, it referred to a literal period of persecution (like arose in the mid-second century when the most famous martyr from Smyrna, Polykarp, was martyred). What does Jesus tell this church to do in light of the coming trial? This is Jesus's exhortation.

Notice verse 10b - 11: "**Be faithful until (or unto) death, and I will give you the crown of life**". What is the crown of life? The Gk word used here is NOT *diadema* (a royal crown) but is *stephanos* (a victor's crown). This same phrase is used by James in James 1: 12, **Blessed are those who endure** (or, **remains steadfast**) **temptation** (or, **under trial**); **for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised for those who love Him** (or, see ESV for alternative interpretation).

The 'crown of life' is a reference to eternal life - and the reason Jesus tells this church to be faithful and they will receive, is because perseverance in faith is necessary if a church/person would receive eternal life from Christ. This is the uniform testimony of scripture:

Jesus taught this (see Matt. 10:22; 24:13, 45-51);

Paul taught this (see 1 Cor. 9: 24-27; 2 Tim. 2:12b);

The writer to the Hebrews taught this (Heb. 3:5-12; 5:11 - 6:8; 10: 26-39);

Peter taught this (2 Peter 2: 1-22 and esp. vv.21-22);

Jesus teaches this in Revelation 2: 7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3: 5, 12 and 21.

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(How is a person to 'overcome'? How is it possible for a church or Christian to preserve? I don't have time to develop that tonight - but one night in the near future, we can get into that in some detail).

So, in the letter to the church at Smyrna we have a greeting, a title of Christ, a commendation and an exhortation - but we have NO condemnation of conduct and no warning. And after writing what he wrote in vv. 8, 9 and 10, Jesus closes this letter with a precious promise.

The precious promise is in verse 11 - He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death - which is a phrase taken from rabbinic literature and which refers to the death of the wicked in the next world - also called the lake of fire in Revelation 20: 14.

In closing, let me remind you of four applications - take aways - which this letter gives to us:

1st, we see in the letter to the church in Smyrna how in tribulations, Christ Jesus knows of it, and also it's impact on His church (v.9), and this means we do NOT pass through tribulation without the Lord's knowledge nor presence. He is aware - and He is actively involved. This letter cries this out really, really loud!

2nd, we learn from Jesus in v. 9 what true wealth is versus false - or temporal - wealth. True wealth is knowing and belonging to Christ and is spiritual in nature. Physical wealth provides certain benefits in this life, but has no real, spiritual and eternal value;

3rd, Tribulation, and suffering should never be feared - but rather, should foster confidence;

4th, Priority in suffering should be placed upon remaining faithful to the Lord in trial, more than anything else.

And so we see in this letter how Jesus identifies Himself to them by referring to Himself as ***'the first and the last'*** which is an identifier for the God who is ruling - who is sovereign - who is in control of all things. And this descriptor is wedded to the resurrection by the words, "***who died and came back to life***". In other words, by the title Jesus chooses for Himself as he writes this church at Smyrna, He assures and encourages by asserting His supremacy over the events which are about to take place - as well as His total victory over death; and this simply says to those in Smyrna, I overcame death - and in me, so do you. This has always been one of the great benefits of the church and of Christians - and so one of the refrains from the ancient liturgy of John Chrysostom for the celebration of Christ's resurrection proclaims:

"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death - and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!"

Because Christ has overcome death those who belong to Christ will overcome death too. And if overcoming death is one of the great promises given to the church and to those who have faith in Christ, then there is no need to fear those who can kill the body but have no further power.

So by taking this as His title, and then giving the instruction He gives, Jesus **assures** these besieged Christians, **undergirds the faith** of these besieged Christians and **encourages them** to hold fast their faith, even if it meant being faithful to death. . .and we have this same assurance, if we also trust Jesus Christ. Amen. And in these words to the church at Smyrna, the church through the ages and we also, have assurance that should we suffer furor faith in the way the Smyranean church did or in other ways, Jesus Christ, our Lord, will be with us, in the same way He was with them - and we have the same calling as they had - be faithful unto death, if it comes to that, and He will give us the crown of life!