

MESSAGES TO THE CHURCHES:
“SMYRNA: THE FEARFUL CHURCH”
Revelation 2:8-11

Theme: When all is said and done, the believer will never regret being faithful.

The format of the messages to the churches follows a pattern of:

- 1) *The Command to Write*
- 2) *The Characterization of Christ*
- 3) *The Commendation of the Church*
- 4) *The Condemnation of the Church*
- 5) *The Correction of the Church*
- 6) *The Call to the Church*
- 7) *The Challenge for the Church*

I. THE ADVERSITIES OF FAITH – 2:9

A. *The Persecution of the Church*

1. This message to the church at Smyrna begins with the self-disclosure of Christ most relevant to their situation – *“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead and has come to life, says this...”* – cp. 1:17b-18
2. Smyrna is a church facing tremendous persecution in the midst of a hotbed of hostility toward Christians:
 - a. Smyrna was a notorious center of Emperor worship – well rewarded by Rome for their lead in loyalty to the Lord of the Empire.
 - b. It was also a place where polytheistic religions abounded – with significant temples to Cybele, Zeus, Apollo, Asklepios, and Aphrodite.
 - c. Smyrna also had a significant population of Jews who were hostile toward Christians and desired to set the Romans against them to eliminate them.
3. In light of the severity of the persecution that the believers in Smyrna were to face, Christ reveals Himself as God who proved His power over death:
 - a. *“the first and the last”* is a name for God used in the OT – Isaiah 44:6
 - b. *“who was dead and has come to life”* refers to none other than the resurrection and the victory of Christ over death.
4. Interestingly, *“Smyrna”* literally means “bitter” and is used in the LXX for “myrrh” which is a spice used in the process of embalming – a relevant name in light of the martyrdom that this church would be facing.

An Exposition of The Revelation

5. Thus, despite the fact that persecution might take one all the way to a martyr's death, we are able to possess the confidence that Christ Jesus is able to deliver us safely to glory.
6. Hence, He says: ***"I know your tribulation ..."***
 - a. The term ***"tribulation"*** literally means "pressure" – a squeezing that causes the pressure to build and is used to describe the distresses caused by war, or a woman in childbirth, and of persecution from which a person could not escape.
 - b. Although Smyrna had been the center of emperor worship since AD 26, under the reign of Domitian, it became even more significant since worship of the emperor became compulsory from AD 81-96 – the refusal for which was the death penalty.
 - c. Thus, there was tremendous pressure to burn incense in worship of Domitian and declare "Caesar is Lord" – the failure to do so meaning death.
7. He also says: ***"...and your poverty ..."***
 - a. It is clear that the poverty being referred to here is not because of a lower class or that the Christian population was comprised of slaves.
 - b. The likelihood is that the refusal to confess Caesar as god resulted in the arrest, deprivation, ostracism, and employment prejudice that left the Christians destitute.
 - c. This ***"poverty"*** was a direct result of their Christian faith
 - d. But he reminds them – almost parenthetically - that despite the physical poverty and deprivation that is brought on by their loyalty to and service of Christ Jesus, they are spiritually greatly blessed – ***"...(but your are rich)"***

B. The Prejudice Against the Church – "...and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

1. The tribulation of these saints is further complicated by those whose hostilities were even more intense ***"by those who say they are Jews and are not"*** – those who were physically Jews, but who are in reality the enemies of God.
2. The term ***"blasphemy"*** literally means to "slander" and conveys the notion that all kinds of false accusations about the Christians were being tossed about.
3. There were six principle accusations that commonly were levied against believers in the 1st Century:
 - a. **CANNIBALISM** – because of the Lord's Table
 - b. **LUST & IMMORALITY** – because of the holy kiss

An Exposition of The Revelation

- c. **HOME-WRECKERS** – because of the mixed marriage and departure of unbelieving spouse
 - d. **ATHEISM** – because of the denial of the false gods
 - e. **POLITICAL DISLOYALTY** – because of the refusal to honor Caesar
 - f. **INCENDIARISM** – because of the riots that resulted from the preaching of Christ and the exclusivity of “The Way.”
4. Apparently, there were influential Jews in Smyrna who desired to accuse the believers of such activities and plotted together to afflict them – serving as it were as a *“synagogue of Satan”* in the sense that they “gathered together” with Satan for the purpose of receiving instruction and carrying out the plan.

II. THE ADMONITIONS TO FAITHFULNESS – *2:8, 10a*

A. *The Portrayal of Christ – v. 8*

1. As noted before, the revelation of Christ Jesus was designed to provide these beleaguered Christians some encouragement knowing that the worst that the enemies of God could do was kill them
2. However, Christ Jesus has promised them ultimate victory – that even though they might be slain, Christ will raise them in the rapture so that they will prevail in the end.
3. In light of Christ’s power and glory, they ought to remain faithful to the end.

B. *The Precepts for Christians – v. 10a*

1. There are several instructions given in light of Christ’s glory.
2. First, Jesus commands them: *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer ...”* – literally “stop being afraid ...”
 - a. They were about to endure the most grueling of their persecutions and Christ desires that the opportunities afforded through it bring credibility to the genuineness of His grace and their faith.
 - b. Thus, through their suffering and adversities, the virility of the Christian graces, validity of God’s promises, and vitality of faith are all placed on marvelous display for all to see – believer and unbeliever alike.
3. He informs them that *“Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested ...”* – with the intention of their passing the tests by God’s grace.
4. The persecution would be intense, but brief as one by one notable believers will be being cast into prison – *“and you will have tribulation for ten days.”*
5. Regardless of what they were to face, the purpose of God in it was for them to prove the value of the Faith – *“... Be faithful until death ...”* – cp. *Matthew 10:28*

III. THE ADVANTAGES OF THE FAITHFUL – 2:10b-11

A. *The Provision of the Crown of Life – v. 10b*

1. The Lord provides a personal promise: *“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*
2. There seems to be a personal privilege of receiving the symbolic *“crown”* of victory directly from the Lord as an incentive to *“be[ing] faithful until death.”*
3. This is not to suggest that people who are not martyred do not receive the *“crown of life”* – cp. *1 Corinthians 9:24-25; Philipians 3:14; 2 Timothy 2:5; James 1:12*
4. Those who teach that faithfulness is the means of gaining eternal life fail to comprehend the issue of perseverance – that suffering furnishes tangible assurance that one will receive eternal life through the faith in Christ that has brought on the persecution

B. *The Protection from the Second Death – v. 11*

1. The Lord then calls upon all believers to pay attention to the call to faithfulness – *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*
2. The ultimate promise is then given – *“He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”*
3. In the strongest negative statement that is afforded by the Greek language, Christ declares that despite the fact that His followers may be called upon to sacrifice life in service to Him, He personally guarantees that *“the second death”* will never be tasted.
4. Death is essentially a separation and there are three kinds of death:
 - a. SPIRITUAL DEATH – separation of soul from God
 - b. PHYSICAL DEATH – separation of soul from body
 - c. SECOND DEATH – separation of soul and body from God – cp. *John 11:25-26; Revelation 20:14.*