

07. The Book of Revelation—2:8-10

(6/24/20)

We have entered into the second major section of the Book of Revelation—chapters 2 and 3.

As we said last time, when Christians think of the Book of Revelation, they immediately think of chapters 6-19 which contain all of the cataclysmic judgments God will bring on this wicked, Christ-rejecting world.

But as I tried to point out last time—those chapters have nothing to do with Christians living on the earth during the Church Age. (Explain)

In chapters 2 and 3 Jesus dictates 7 letters to 7 churches in Asia Minor (Turkey)—why these 7 when there were other larger and more important churches than these?

It was because these 7 churches contain conditions that could be applied *spiritually* and *practically* allowing Jesus to use them to address His Church as a whole throughout history in a way that would be beneficial to its purity and growth going forward.

1. They had a local application

These were 7 real churches that existed at that time and these letters were addressed to them by the Lord Jesus as a kind of ‘report card’ to show each of them how they were doing in His sight.

2. They have an historic application

These 7 churches, in a symbolic way, speak to different periods of Church history from the Apostolic period (1st century) to the Rapture (close of the Church Age)—and therefore the order they appear in chapters 2 and 3 is significant.

3. They have a timeless application

They speak to *all* churches in *all* ages and in *all* places throughout the world—each church having its own *distinctive* character:

Ephesus—the loveless church.

Smyrna—the persecuted church.

Pergamos—the compromising church.

Thyatira—the idolatrous church.

Sardis—the dead church.

Philadelphia—the faithful church.

Laodicea—the apostate church.

4. They have a personal application

We are the Church of Jesus Christ not the building.

These letters are a ‘mirror’ that every Christian should look into from time to time and use to examine our own individual walk and relationship with the Lord—is it *loveless*, *compromising*, *dead*, *faithful*, etc.

Last week we looked at the **Church of Ephesus**—the church that was serving the Lord to the point of exhaustion but had left its ‘first love’ (hymoon love).

That church symbolically represented the first century Christian Church—which was generally praiseworthy but at one point became ‘mechanical’ in its service and was going thru the ‘motions’ but had lost the ‘emotion’ in its service to Jesus.

That brings us to the second letter Jesus dictated—the Letter to the Church of Smyrna.

The Church of Smyrna (the persecuted church)—v.8-11

This letter is only 4 verses long (it's more of a postcard than a letter).

I think it's significant that to the church suffering the most—Jesus said the least.

This is a good lesson for all of us to lean when ministering to those who are suffering—

- Be there to show you care
- Say as little as possible.
- Be sensitive
- Help with practical things (meals, choirs, child-care, errands)
- Above all fight the urge to ‘preach’ or give pious ‘platitudes’ (“*all things work together for good to those who love the Lord...*” etc.)

And remember this—whenever we suffer, for whatever reason, at that point we can choose to fight and complain—or we can submit and learn.

In other words, we can choose to allow the suffering to make us *bitter* or *better*.

The Commission

Revelation 2:8 (NKJV)

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write,

The name Smyrna

As we have already seen, the name of each church is significant—Smyrna means ‘*myrrh* (bitter).’

The city of Smyrna was named after one of its principle products which it was commercially famous for—**myrrh**.

- Myrrh is a resin that comes from the dried sap of the ‘Commiphora tree’.
- The theme of this letter is suffering and death which is fitting because myrrh was used to bury the dead.
- Myrrh was also used to make perfume for the living.
- The fragrance could only be released from the myrrh by *crushing* it—the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off the fragrance of Christ (faithfulness to God).

“At Smyrna, unlike Ephesus, there was no waning of love for Jesus Christ. Because the believers at Smyrna loved Him, they remained faithful to Him; because of that faithfulness, they were hated; because they were hated, they were persecuted; that persecution in turn incited them to love Christ more.”

- Myrrh was one of the three gifts given to Jesus after His birth—the others were *gold* and *frankincense*. The gold spoke of His Kingship; the frankincense of His Priesthood; and the myrrh of His death.
- In the Millennial Kingdom people will bring Him gold and frankincense but no myrrh. (Rev.1:18—Explain)

The city of Smyrna

- Smyrna was an ancient city, it may have been settled as early as 3000 B.C., but the first Greek settlement dates from about 1000 B.C.
- Around 600 B.C. Smyrna was destroyed by the Lydians and lay in ruins for more than three centuries until two of Alexander the Great’s successors rebuilt the city in 290 B.C.—which of course was the Smyrna of John’s day.

- Although Ephesus and Pergamos equaled or surpassed it in political and economic importance—Smyrna was said to be the most beautiful city in Asia.
- It was located on a gulf of the Aegean Sea and, unlike Ephesus (35 miles to the south of Smyrna), was blessed with an excellent harbor.
- In addition to the natural beauty of its surroundings, the city itself was well designed—it stretched from the bay up the slopes of Mt. Pagos—a large hill covered with temples and other public buildings.
- The streets were well laid out, with the outlying ones lined with groves of trees.
- Smyrna’s most famous street, the “*Street of Gold*,” curved around the slopes of Mt. Pagos.
- At one end was the temple of Kybele (goddess of nature and mother of all gods), and at the other the temple of Zeus—in between were the temples of Apollo, Asklepios (god of medicine), and Aphrodite.
- Smyrna was a noted center of science and medicine—it was also one of several cities that claimed to be the birthplace of the poet Homer.
- Unlike Ephesus which eventually became uninhabited, Smyrna, survived several earthquakes and fires and exists today as the Turkish city of Izmir with a population of several hundred thousand—1/3 of which are Christians.

The Character

Revelation 2:8 (NKJV)

⁸ "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, '**These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:**

Jesus begins this letter with a title of Himself from the vision John saw of Him in chapter one that sets the mood or tone of the letter.

“**The First and the Last**” speak to His eternal character, and are specific titles that belong only to Yahweh, according to Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12

“**Who was dead and came to life**” reminds the Christians in Smyrna that they serve the Lord who has risen victorious over death—death could not hold Him, and it cannot hold His people! (John 14:19)

Remember that these 7 churches, in a symbolic way, speak to different periods of Church history from the Apostolic period (1st century) to the Rapture (close of the Church Age).

Smyrna symbolically represents the period of church history from the first to the fourth century, where the church suffered persecution under the Roman emperors.

The Commendation

In verse 9 Jesus gives them a commendation—

Revelation 2:9 (NKJV)

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.

Twice in this verse Jesus says to this suffering persecuted church that had lost so many loved ones—“*I know...I know...*”

There are times when I have to try to comfort someone who has lost a husband or a wife or a child—and I do my best.

But then someone comes to them who has lost someone close to them and they fall into each other’s arms and the one says to the other—“*I know, I know...*”

Here it's as if Jesus has His arms around this church and is saying, *"I know, I know what you are going through—I too was persecuted, I too have tasted death but it's not the end—I was dead and I rose to live again—just like your loved ones will someday rise and live again..."*

Just like He does with all of us who are His—He knows what we're going through—He knows our suffering and our pain—He isn't blind to the things that are happening in our lives and often 'hugs' us thru other believers in the Body.

"I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich)..."

The "**tribulation**" in verse 9 isn't talking about the "Great Tribulation" but the tribulation that all Christians suffer for their faith—especially those who are living in a very hostile environment (China, India, Africa etc.)

I read this yesterday—

"The persecution of Christians in India is on the rise with a report of one believer being murdered for his faith by Hindu radicals in his own village. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Kande Mudu, 27, was attacked and murdered by a group of armed men in the Khunti district of India's Jharkhand state on June 7. He had converted to Christianity four years ago. Mudu's family were the only Christians living in their village. They had faced threats to their lives and had survived one violent attack on their home two years ago. Mudu was killed when the mob showed up at his house, broke down the front door, and attacked him with weapons. During the brutal attack, his throat was cut. Bindu Mudu, Kande's wife, told CSW, *"After hearing the men at the front door, my husband knew that our lives were in danger and that the men had bad intentions."* Mudu then reportedly told his wife, He might be killed but assured her to *"remain strong and never to give up her faith in Jesus even if they killed him."*

John 16:33 (NKJV)

³³ "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

2 Timothy 3:12 (NKJV)

¹² Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

One thing we can take from these 7 letters is that each church had a wrong view of themselves—just like many individual Christians.

Some thought they were *better* than they were—and others thought they were *worse* than they were.

1 Corinthians 4:3-5 (NKJV)

³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

Here the church of Smyrna thought they were *failures*—but Jesus saw them as a great success!

They thought they were *poor*—but Jesus said in the eyes of God they were very rich (in faith and in heavenly rewards)—in contrast to the Church at Laodicea.

The word "**poverty**" in the Greek means "*abject poverty, totally destitute.*"

You see, back then every *guild* (forerunner to our modern ‘trade unions’) had its own patron god or goddess in the Greek pantheon that they worshipped and relied upon for good fortune.

And as such, they would begin each day with a ‘*pledge of allegiance*’ to that particular deity.

But the Christians wouldn't participate so they couldn't be a member of the guild which meant they couldn't work—which was why they were so impoverished.

So understand, they were not poor for a lack of faith—they were poor because they had great faith in that they remained loyal to Jesus and trusted Him to take care of them.

And of course He did—they might not have had everything they wanted, but He gave them everything they needed!

I want you to notice that even though they were a *poor* church Jesus didn't rebuke them for their poverty; and even though they were a *suffering* church Jesus didn't condemn them like a lot of modern televangelists and pastors would have.

Jesus doesn't say here, "*I know your poverty—it shouldn't be!*" "*I know you're suffering—shame on you where's your faith!?*" (Explain)

Today, we're being told by Word of Faith preachers that if a person had enough faith they wouldn't be poor and they wouldn't suffer—but to the church in Smyrna Jesus commends them for having great faith and points to their poverty and suffering as proof of it.

Revelation 2:9 (NKJV)

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.**

In the early years of the Church much of the persecution it faced was from Jews who saw Christianity as a cult claiming to be the fulfillment of Judaism.

This didn't sit well with the Jews who saw it as their mission to wipe out this cult. (Saul of Tarsus was originally one of these Jewish antagonists)—here was some of the charges these Jews brought against Christians:

- Unbelieving Jews commonly accused Christians of cannibalism (based on a misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper),
- Immorality (based on a perversion of the holy kiss with which believers greeted each other; cf. Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26),
- Breaking up homes (when one spouse became a Christian and the other did not, it often caused conflict; cf. Luke 12:51–53),
- Atheism (because they rejected the pagan pantheon of deities),
- And political disloyalty and rebellion (because Christians refused to offer the required sacrifices to the emperor).

Once a year every Roman citizen was required to stand before a bust of Caesar and with a pinch of incense in the sacrificial fire was to say, "*Kasiar Kurios*" which means "Caesar is lord."

The Christians wouldn't say that—so they were persecuted and killed.

There was a large Jewish population in Smyrna and some of the wealthy, influential Jews reported these false allegations to the Romans.

Jesus called these haters of the gospel a "**synagogue of Satan**"—in other words they saw themselves as a '*synagogue of God*', doing the work of God in destroying Christianity—but in reality they were a '*synagogue of Satan*', doing the work of the devil.

Jesus told the Pharisees in John 8, "*You are of your father the devil*" and He told His disciples, "*There is coming a time when those who kill you will think they are serving God.*" (John 16:2)

More Christians have been killed by people who claim to represent God than by atheists or communists—first by the Jews, then by the Roman Catholic Church, and now by followers of Islam.

Persecution of the church at Smyrna reached its climax 50 years after this letter, with the execution of its aged bishop, Polycarp (a disciple of the Apostle John), in which the unbelieving Jews played a major role.

History records the death of Polycarp after he was arrested and brought into the stadium in Smyrna—

"And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, '*respect to thy old age*' and other similar things, according to their custom, [such as], '*Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists...and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ*'; Polycarp declared, '*Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?*'"

The proconsul then said to him, *'I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast thee, except thou repent.'* But he answered, *'Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous.'* But again the proconsul said to him, *'I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing thou despisest the wild beasts, if thou wilt not repent.'* But Polycarp said, *'Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt.'*

This, then, was carried into effect with greater speed than it was spoken, the multitudes immediately gathering together wood and sticks out of the shops and baths; the Jews especially, according to custom, eagerly assisting them in it. And when the funeral pile was ready Polycarp went willingly to the stake.

They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And he, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a distinguished ram [taken] out of a great flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said,

'O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before thee, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before Thee as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as Thou, the ever-truthful God, hast fore-ordained, hast revealed beforehand to me, and now hast fulfilled.

Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.'

When he had pronounced this amen, and so finished his prayer, those who were appointed for the purpose kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed forth in great fury, we, to whom it was given to witness it, beheld a great miracle, and have been preserved that we might report to others what then took place. For the fire, shaping itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, encompassed as by a circle the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odor [coming from the pile], as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there.

At length, when those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with a dagger. And on his doing this, there came forth a dove, and a great quantity of blood, so that the fire was extinguished; and all the people wondered that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect...

The blood of the martyrs has always been the 'seed' of the Church. (Explain)

As I said last week, these 7 letters follow a particular ‘pattern’ or ‘structure’.

At this point there is usually a ‘**Condemnation**’ followed by a ‘**Correction**’—however the letters to *Smyrna* and *Philadelphia* are missing these indicating that, while not perfect, Jesus acknowledges they were not guilty of anything worthy of a condemnation and correction.

In place of the condemnation and correction—Jesus chooses rather to offer up to the Church of Smyrna an **exhortation**—

Revelation 2:10 (NKJV)

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.

“Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer”

“Do not fear” is more literally *“stop being afraid”*.

These Christians in Smyrna were *afraid*—they were human beings, not robots, and sometimes even the strongest Christians become fearful—especially in the face of physical persecution and death.

“The devil is about to throw some of you into prison”

This persecution was from the devil—the question is: *“Why couldn't these Christians in Smyrna just rebuke Satan and bind this attack upon them?”*—I mean, isn't that what's being taught today in Word of Faith churches?

These Christians couldn't ‘bind’ Satan because—God had a purpose in their suffering: to purify them (1 Peter 1:6-7); to make them like Jesus (Romans 8:17); and to be a witness (Revelation 12:10).

And so, in that regard, Satan was allowed by God to persecute these Christians because it served His purposes for the their lives.

Most specifically in this case, it was so that they might be tested, in the sense of being proven through this suffering.

In other words, God would use physical persecution to display the true riches of the church in Smyrna to everyone, including themselves—even though He already knew their hearts, their faith and their spiritual wealth.

“...and you will have tribulation ten days.”

There has been much debate regarding the meaning of the ‘**ten days**’.

Is John really speaking of *ten literal days* of persecution, *ten years* of persecution, or *ten periods of persecution led by ten Roman Emperors*? (Explain)

It is true that in the first 3 centuries of the Church there were 10 Roman Emperors who severely persecuted the Church killing between five and seven million Christians.

However, the first would have been Nero in 64-68 AD—and Jesus didn’t even dictate this letter to John until 95 AD—and even then He said the persecution was yet *future*.

Some have suggested that the "**ten days**" is a Hebrew idiom that speaks of something being ‘*cut off*’ or *limited* in duration. (Comment)

It’s probably best to just take this literally—as author Mark Hitchcock encourages us to do:

“It is preferable to interpret the 10 days of tribulation as a reference to a literal 10-day period of brief, intense trial that the Believers in Smyrna were going to suffer. The trial would be intense, but God, in his grace, would limit it to 10 days.

When we face trials, we can receive comfort from this passage. While we do not know in advance how long a trial will last, we can rest assured that the entire length of the trial is under God’s Sovereign control...”

I once read how a pastor asked the people in his small group to give their favorite verse on the subject of suffering,

“As each person gave their favorite verse or verses on suffering, one woman said that her favorite verse on the subject of suffering was ‘it came to pass’. The pastor was puzzled by this and asked the woman how those words applied to suffering. She enthusiastically responded, ‘Whenever I go thru a time of suffering, I just remind myself ‘it didn’t come to stay, it came to pass!’ ‘Okay’, the pastor said, “let’s all thank our dear sister for reminding us that whenever we go thru a time of suffering—“it didn’t come to stay, it came to pass!””

1 Peter 5:6-10 (NKJV)

⁶ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, ⁷ casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. ⁸ Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. ¹⁰ But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle *you*.

Last Friday I spoke to a group of pastors and wives and I told them—it seems as we look at the various prophetic signs coming to pass and current events taking place that Jesus is coming very soon.

In fact, if you listen hard enough you can almost hear the footsteps of the Bridegroom coming for His Bride.

So what’s left?—that we finish well.

This is the home stretch, the finish line is in sight—we now more than ever before must stay focused and determined, by God’s grace, that we not stumble or fall away.

That we do not do something stupid and cause years of faithful ministry to be brought down thru scandal or thru a momentary lapse in judgment—as someone has said, *“It takes 30 years to build a ministry and 30 minutes (or less) to destroy it.”*

We *must* finish well, or Pastor Chuck used to say, *“stay the course”* or as Vance Havner, the old Baptist preacher put it *“We must get home before dark.”* (Explain)