

The Son of Man’s Message to the Church in Smyrna

(Revelation 2:8-11 NASB) “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.’

I. Cultural Context of the Church in Smyrna



- a. Smyrna was a large port city close to Athens. This city competed economically with Ephesus and Pergamos and often called “*the most beautiful city*” in Asia Minor. Smyrna was celebrated as an “*intellectual town*”, celebrated for its schools of science and medicine. It was also understood, that the Greek poet, Homor, was from Smyrna.
- b. Smyrna held the import and export rights to the space called, myrrh (commonly used in burial procedures). I believe this is a prophetic symbol for the martyrdom and death that church in Smyrna embraced.

II. The Specific Revelation of Jesus to the Church in Smyrna

(Revelation 2:8 NASB) “The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this...”

- a. The First and the Last – Jesus is the beginning and the end. He is the source of all things and has all authority. The Church of Smyrna was heavily persecuted, so Jesus was reminding them that He is in control of all things despite what they face.

(Colossians 1:15-18 NASB) “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation: 16 for by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or rulers, or authorities all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 He is also the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.”

- b. Who was dead, and has come to life – Jesus experienced the painful sting of death and could sympathize with what the Church in Smyrna was experiencing. However, He also reminded the church in Smyrna that He conquered death. This provided encouragement for the church in Smyrna because if they were crucified with Him, they knew that they would also share in His resurrection.

(Hebrews 4:15-16 NASB) “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses... 16 Therefore let’s approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace for help at the time of our need.”

III. This Affirmation & Recognition of The Church In Smyrna

(Revelation 2:9-10 NASB) “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...”

- a. Jesus acknowledged three heavy weights upon the Church in Smyrna: Their poverty, the slander against them by “*the synagogue of Satan*”, as well as suffering, persecution, and tribulation.
- b. Poverty - In Smyrna, as Christians made a stand for Jesus, it often meant they’d get kicked out of the trade unions and lose their businesses in the city square leaving many impoverished. This impoverished lifestyle was a real challenge for new converts and tested their commitment to Jesus. Despite the fact that they were struggling in poverty, Jesus told them, “*but you are rich*”. Their success as a church wasn’t in earthly riches.

(Proverbs 15:16 NASB) “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord Than great treasure, and turmoil with the treasure.”

(Acts 2:44-45 NASB) “And all the believers were together and had all things in common; 45 and they would sell their property and possessions and share them with all, to the extent that anyone had need.”

(James 2:5 NASB) “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters: did God not choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him”

- c. Slander From The Synagogue of Satan - Jews who went to synagogue in the Roman Empire had an exemption from participating in the temple sacrifices to the Emperor. Jews began incorporating liturgy that denounced and slandered the Christian converts making it challenging for converts to attend synagogue. Also, non-Jews would open synagogues so that they could get the exemption from emperor worship as well and these people (among other things) would accuse believers of being cannibalistic (eating his flesh and drinking his blood).
- d. Suffering, Testing, and Tribulation – When Christians didn’t participate in emperor worship, they faced persecution from the Roman Empire. The Roman empire considered Christians to be “*antisocial*” and “*rebellious*” against their established order. Christians would be thrown into rat infested prisons to be tortured and killed (often in arenas filled with people).
 - i. In 63 A.D. (About 30 years Before John wrote Revelation) a large fire lasting 6 days broke out in Rome claiming thousands of lives and 14 of Rome’s districts. Some thought it was the Emperor Nero who started the fire to “*reestablish*” the order of Rome, but He blamed it on Christians and called them “*the evil new superstition*”. Nero then Crucified Christians on rows of crosses and set them on fire as rode his horse down the middle.
 - ii. A few decades after John wrote Revelation, Polycarp one of John’s disciples who was one of the first bishops of the church in Smyrna was martyred. He was sentenced to be burned alive, but when they set fire, the flames didn’t touch him, so they killed him with the sword.
- e. 10 Days – This phrase is not meant to be taken as 10 literal days. Most commentators agree that it actually means “*a short time, or a period of time*”. Some commentators believe it means 10 years, or “10 particular persecutions”. It seems that the primary reason Jesus mentions this isn’t to explain the duration of their suffering, but to ensure them of hope that it will come to an appointed end.

IV. Jesus' Call For The Church To Respond

(Revelation 2:10b NASB) “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life”

- a. Despite the pressure and persecution that the church in Smyrna was about to face, Jesus called the them to “be faithful until death”. The early church was intimately acquainted with the reality of suffering and martyrdom as it was the normative expression for true disciples of Christ. The Christianity that ones in Smyrna signed up for, was one that followed a wounded and crucified Messiah. The hope of the early church wasn't found in the ease of life or self-preservation, but in friendship with a Man who is worthy of both living for and dying for, who promises a future resurrection to His disciples.

- i. Words of Jesus related to embracing suffering, persecution, and martyrdom:

(Matthew 5:10-12 NASB) “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

(Matthew 16:24 NASB) “Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.”

(Matthew 24:9 NASB) “Then they will hand you over to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name.”

(Luke 14:26-27 NASB) “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate [gk. “Miseo” – Love less, to postpone in love or esteem] his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”

(John 15:20 NASB) “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well; if they followed My word, they will follow yours also.”

(John 16:33 NASB) “These things I have spoken to you so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

(Matthew 10:22 NASB) “And you will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.”

- b. The crown of life - The crown is a symbol for royalty and was a symbol of the city Smyrna. Pagan priests would be honored by wearing a crown during religious dance practices where everyone was intoxicated. At Olympic games, which were held in Smyrna, winners would wear crowns. The crown of life that Jesus promised is for those endure trial while still being faithful. It speaks of authority granted in the age to come.

(James 1:12 NASB) “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

(1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 NASB) “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as indeed the rest of mankind do, who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. 15 For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then

we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore, comfort one another with these words.

(Luke 21:19 NASB) “By your endurance you will gain your lives.”

V. Overcomers Promise

(Revelation 2:11 NASB) “The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.”

- a. Jesus’ promise for those who stood faithful until death wasn’t just the crown of life, but that they would not be hurt by the second death. The second death is the lake of fire which is reserved for death, hades, and those who reject Jesus.

(Revelation 20:6,14 NASB) “Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and will reign with Him for a thousand years. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.”

(Revelation 21:8 NASB) “But for the cowardly, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

- b. This message invites “*all with ears to hear*” to respond rightly to its context. Often we who live in the west consider suffering, persecution, and martyrdom to be peripheral or irrelevant topics, but the reality is, thousands are slain for their faith every year throughout the nations and as the coming end time storm draws closer these are realities that the global body of Christ will soon come face-to-face with. Our call to respond to persecution and martyrdom is the same as it was to the church in Smyrna; be faithful unto death.

(Revelation 2:11a NASB) “The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”

(Daniel 7:21-22 NASB) “I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and prevailing against them, 22 until the Ancient of Days came and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom.”

(Revelation 12:17 NASB) “So the dragon [Satan] was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

(Revelation 13:7-10 NASB) “It was also given to him [Antichrist] to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority was given to him over every tribe, people, language, and nation. 8 All who live on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written since the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slaughtered. 9 If anyone has an ear, let him hear. 10 If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.”

(Revelation 12:11 NASB) “and they [the end time saints] overcame him [satan] 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.”