

The Seven Churches of Revelation

Lesson 2
Rev. 2:8-11

In our last lesson we looked at the church at Ephesus, the first of the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2-3. Moving geographically clockwise from Ephesus, the next church to be addressed is Smyrna. Unlike Ephesus which was rebuked for losing the love they had a first, Smyrna receives no rebuke.

First century Smyrna was a city of about 100,000 located about sixty kilometres north of Ephesus. Smyrna is the only one of the seven cities, where the churches were located, that still survives. Today the city is known as Izmir in the nation of Turkey and has a population of over three million.

Smyrna became a centre for the cult of emperor worship. In 23 B.C. a temple was built for the Emperor Tiberius. Later emperors, Nero who ruled from A.D. 54-68, and Domitian, who ruled from A.D. 81-96, brought severe persecution on the early church.¹

We have no record in the New Testament of the establishment of the church in Smyrna. It may have been started by the Apostle Paul during his third missionary journey (53-56 A.D.), but this cannot be known with certainty.² Both Ignatius and Irenaeus, early church historians, record that Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John was an elder in this church before being martyred for Christ in 155 A.D. by being burned alive at the stake.³ Polycarp was eighty-six at the time of his death.

The Church at Smyrna *"The Poor, but Rich Church"*

In the Revelation the Apostle John pens the words of Christ who addresses each church differently. To the church at Smyrna Christ calls himself: ***"the first and the last, who died and came to life."*** (Rev. 2:8).

Description Christ gives himself to the church at Smyrna

"the first and the last, who died and came to life." (Rev. 2:8)

¹ <http://www.padfield.com/1999/smyrna.html>

² Acts 19:10: "...all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

³ Polycarp is said to have uttered these words to the governor who promised to save his life if he would deny Christ: "eighty-six years I have served the Lord, and He never wronged me; how then can I blaspheme my Lord and Savior?"
<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/polycarp-testimony/>

As with each of the churches, Christ speaks to the “angel” of the church.⁴ For the Lord to refer to himself as **“the first and the last, who died and came to life”** shows his authority, sovereignty, and victory. He is first as the Everlasting God. He is the first to rise from the dead, never to die again (Rev. 1:5.)



Christ is also the last since he brings to completion the work of salvation in his death and resurrection. He is the Lord of the church which will live with him forever. He is the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) and brings an end to the power of death (Rom. 8:11). Since Christ suffered in the flesh and was victorious (Gal 3:13) he shows a suffering church, which was bearing up under severe trial, that they too could be victorious.

1. What three trials were the Christians at Smyrna suffering? (Rev. 2:9)

The Greek word for tribulation is *thlipsin* and it “comes from a word which means pressure or pressing together.” This is the word used to describe the pressing of grapes to extract the juice.⁵ This tribulation was unrelenting crushing and included both physical suffering and emotional distress. In this case it was both the Jewish leaders and surrounding pagans who were the persecutors and tormentors.

2. What does the Apostle Paul say about persecution in 2 Timothy 3:12?

Not only did the church experience tribulation, it also endured poverty. This poverty came in large part because of the tribulation which robbed the people of jobs, land, and status. They were like Jesus, who became poor on our behalf (2 Cor. 8:9) the Christians in Judea (2 Cor. 8:2), and the Hebrew Christians (Heb. 10:34). This word for “poverty” is not the one which describes those who have little, but those who have nothing.⁶

In the midst of their dire poverty, Jesus says, **“but you are rich.”** They were recipients of God’s grace and the great hope of heaven (Matt. 6:19-20; James 2:5).

3. Describe the difference in the wealth found in this world and in the world to come.

4. Why do people (even Christians) get so caught up in obtaining riches that will shortly pass away?

⁴ See lesson 1 for a discussion of the meaning of angel in Rev. 2-3.

⁵ Smith, James E. *Behold! The Revelation of Jesus*. Lulu, 2008, p. 49-50.

⁶ Bourne, Glenn H. *Tower of Truth: A Study of the Book of Revelation*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR USA, 2001, p. 22.

The third area in which they were enduring was from the ***“slander of those who say they are Jews, and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”*** It was blasphemous for these Jews to call themselves God’s people while persecuting the church. It is now Christians who are God’s chosen people and those who make up the Israel of God. Blasphemy means “to speak against” and a “synagogue” is a place where people are brought together or assemble. The assembly of these hypocrites is a gathering of Satan’s people (Matt. 7:22-23).

These Jews rejected Jesus and subjected the Christians to severe persecution. In fact, early historians tell us that the Jews even brought fuel to burn Polycarp, “in spite of the fact that it was their Sabbath day.”⁷

5. Why is it that sometimes even those who claim to follow God persecute His people?

Jesus does not tell the Christians in Smyrna that they were about to escape this persecution, on the contrary it was about to intensify. Some should expect to be thrown into prison and tested with tribulation. No matter how severe their trials would become Jesus says they should not fear what they were about to suffer.

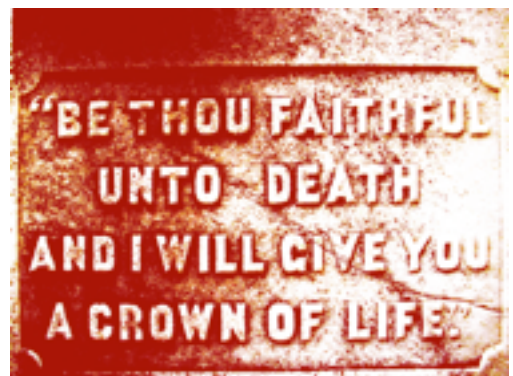
6. Why didn’t God intervene and spare them these terrible times of tribulation?

7. Why is this suffering attributed to the devil?

The time of their severe persecution was going to be limited to ***“ten days.”*** We need not understand this figurative language as ten literal days, but rather a short period of time. Ten is a number of completeness and days is a period of short duration. History tells us the church began a severe period of testing in the days of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) and this persecution extended to the days of Constantine who in 313 A.D. issued the Edict of Milan allowing freedom of religion in the empire. More than 200 years may seem like a long time to us, but it is short as God counts time.

Those who were thrown into prison were often executed so death was a real possibility for any Christian in Smyrna. That is why Jesus says, ***“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”***

This period of tribulation, poverty, slander, imprisonment, and death were times of testing. These Christians were to be faithful till death.



⁷ Ibid. p. 50.

8. Describe what it means to be faithful? (Daniel 6:4; 1 Tim. 4:17; Eph. 6:21)

9. Why should all Christians “expect” persecution? (John 15:20; 1 Peter 4:12,13)

Those who remained faithful would receive the “crown of life.” There were two words for “crown” in Greek. One was a royal crown and the other the victor’s crown. The Christian who overcomes persecution to the end is promised the victor’s crown (1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4). This crown is **dependent** upon the Christian remaining faithful to the very end of his life. This does not mean a Christian “earns” salvation (Eph. 2:8-10), but it is possible some will receive extra recognition for their faithfulness in the face of adversity.

It’s Time to Hear

The call now comes to those who will listen. The Spirit says to the churches. ***“The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”*** This promise is subject to conquering the persecution that is to be faced. The word translated as “conquers” (ESV); “is victorious” (NIV); “overcometh” (KJV); “overcomes” NKJV and NASB, tells us that no matter what is arrayed against a Christian, we are to conquer, overcome, vanquish, and prevail. This is possible through Christ who gives us strength (Philippians 4:13).

Every person will face the death of the body unless he is alive when Jesus returns. There is no way to avoid death and there is only a minimal amount that can be done to delay it. The second death however is what is also known as the second death. It is second because it follows the first death and it is eternal separation from God in Hell.

Revelation 21:8 tells us, ***“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.”*** (Also see Rev. 20:14).

Scripture teaches that Hell is real, eternal, and terrible (Matt. 13:41-42, 49-50; 25:46; Mark 9:43, 48-49; Rev. 14:9-11; 19:3). The good news is that it is avoidable through faithfully living for Christ. The one who conquers will **NOT** be hurt by the second death.



10. Why do people (even Christians) sometimes deny the existence of Hell, believe that it is for a finite period of time, or even believe in the annihilation of the wicked?

Interestingly everyone will die twice. All die physically and those who are disobedient to God will face the second death. Those who are obedient must also die, but it is a death to sin (Romans 6:2). Romans 6:3-4 paints a beautiful picture of baptism: ***“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”***

We are to live faithful lives and our eternal destiny depends on being conquerors until our death. Thankfully, this is not an impossible goal. The God who made us, loves us, sent his Son to die in our place, and will give us the strength to overcome so long as we remain faithful to Him.

11. Why do Christians who are persecuted seem to have a stronger faith than those who live in relative luxury and safety? Should we desire to be persecuted? (2 Tim. 3:12; Matt. 5:10-11)

Promise #2 to the Churches

"The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

Questions for the Upcoming Week

1. Do you ever face trials for in your life for Christ? What are they and how are you able to overcome?
2. Do you consider yourself faithful? Why or why not. Are there any areas you need to strengthen in your life for Christ?
3. Do you ever shy away from conflict and therefore miss opportunities to witness for Christ? If so, what do you need to do to be more bold in your faith?
4. Do you believe in the reality of heaven and hell? If so how should this motivate you to live your own life? How should the reality of hell intensify our desire to reach those who are lost?