

Revelation of Jesus Christ

Study 13

Rev 2:8-11

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:

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.

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.

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.' "

We have already found that the letters to the churches follow a pattern set by the 1st letter to the church at Ephesus. And we see again the pattern here in this church letter.

Each letter contains the following facets:

The correspondent

The church

The city

The commendation

The concern

The command

The counsel

We have already studied the first 3 in our last study and so today we will go to the next facet and look at it and see what Christ is saying to this church.

THE COMMENDATION

Rev 2:9

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Nothing escapes the vision of the glorious Lord of the Smyrna church, who knows every detail about the churches under His care.

He began His commendation of those believers by assuring them that He knew their **tribulation**.

Thlipsis (**tribulation**) literally means "pressure", and is the common New Testament word for persecution or tribulation.

The church at Smyrna was facing intense pressure because of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

There were three reasons for that hostility.

1st As already noted, Smyrna had been fanatically devoted to Rome for several centuries. Not surprisingly, the city was a leading center for the cult of emperor worship. The citizens of Smyrna willingly offered the worship that Emperor Domitian was now demanding of his subjects everywhere.

Though the Christians willingly submitted to the emperor's civil authority as required in the Word of God:

Rom 13:1

1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

They refused to offer sacrifices to him and worship him.

For that refusal they were branded rebels and faced the wrath of the Roman government.

2nd The Christians refused to participate in pagan religion in general. As we have seen before, Smyrna worshiped an eclectic mix of gods, including Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Asklepios, and especially, Clybele.

The Christians' rejection of the pagan pantheon of idols, coupled with their worship of an invisible God, caused them to be denounced as atheists.

Much of Smyrna's social life revolved around pagan worship, and Christians were viewed as antisocial elitists for refusing to participate in it.

3rd Finally the believers at Smyrna faced **blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of** the ultimate blasphemer, **Satan**.

That shocking statement affirmed that those Jews who hated and rejected Jesus Christ were just as much Satan's followers as pagan idol worshipers

John 8:44

44 You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

When Jesus uses the strong term **blasphemy**, which is usually reserved for hostile words against God, it indicates the slander's wickedness, intensity, and severity.

Unbelieving Jews commonly accused Christians of cannibalism (based on a misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper) and upon what Christ said of Himself:

John 6:57

54 "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

55 "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.

56 "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.

And of immorality (based on a perversion of the holy kiss with which believers greeted each other:

Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26

16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.

20 All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.

Of breaking up homes (when one spouse became a Christian and the other did not, it often caused conflict:

Luke 12:51-53

51 Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division.

52 For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three.

53 Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

Of Atheism (because as already noted, Christians rejected the pagan pantheon of deities),

Of political disloyalty and rebellion (because Christians refused to offer the required sacrifices to the Emperor).

Hoping to destroy the Christian faith, some of Smyrna's wealthy, influential Jews reported these blasphemous, false allegations to the Romans.

These haters of the Gospel were a **synagogue of Satan**, meaning they assembled to plan their attack on the church, thus doing Satan's will.

They had claimed to be a synagogue of God, but they were just the opposite.

Sadly the hostility of Smyrna's Jewish population to Christianity was nothing new. The book of acts frequently records such Satan-inspired opposition:

Read:

(Acts 2:13; 4:2-3, 18; 5:17-18, 28, 40; 6:9; 7:54-60; 8:1; 9:20-23; 12:1-3; 13:6, 45; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:6, 12-13; 19:9; 20:3; 21:27; 23:12)

In Smyrna, as had happened so often before, the hostile Jewish population poisoned public opinion against the Christians.

The persecution of Smyrna reached its peak half a century after this letter, with the execution of its aged bishop, Polycarp, in which the unbelieving Jews played a major role.

Look up and read it.

A translated second century document entitled "*The Encyclical Epistle of the church at Smyrna Concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp*" relates the striking story of Polycarp's martyrdom.

Jesus declaration that the Jews who persecuted the Smyrna church **say they are Jews and are not** has caused some to question whether they were racially Jews.

Surely they were physical descendants of Abraham, but not true Jews by Paul's definition:

Rom 8:28-29

28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Those these were by race Jews, they were spiritually pagan.

They allied with the Gentile enemies of God in an attempt to stamp out Christianity in Smyrna.

Not only was the Lord aware of the persecution the Smyrna church faced, but also its **poverty**.

In contrast to its synonym *penes*, which denotes those who struggle to meet their basic needs, *ptocheia*, describes beggars, who live not by their own labor, but they the alms of others:

(cf. Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 128-29).

Many of the believers at Smyrna were slaves; most were destitute. Those few who had owned possessions had undoubtedly lost them in the persecution.

The church at Smyrna had every reason, humanly speaking, to collapse. Instead it remained faithful to its Lord, never (unlike Ephesus) leaving its first love for Him.

For that reason, Jesus said to them, **you are rich**.

They had what really mattered, salvation, holiness, grace, peace, fellowship, a sympathetic Savior and Comforter.

The church at Smyrna was the rich poor church, in contrast to the church at Laodicea, which was the materially rich but spiritually poor church (*Rev 3:17*)

The church at Smyrna typifies the spiritual richness of faithful suffering churches throughout history.

THE COMMAND

Rev 2:10a

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.

After commending them for faithfully enduring persecution, Jesus warned the believers that more was coming.

Before specifying its nature, He commanded them **not to fear** what they were **about to suffer**.

He would give them strength to endure it. As He told his disciples in:

John 16:33

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."

So the suffering believers in the little flock at Smyrna could say with David:

Psa 56:11

11 In God I have put my trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?

More specifically the Lord predicted that **the devil** was **about to cast some of them into prison**.

God's purpose in permitting that imprisonment was **so that** they would **be tested**.

By successfully enduring that trial, they would prove the reality of their faith, be strengthened and prove once again that Satan cannot destroy genuine saving faith.

2 Cor 12:9-10

9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The supernatural battle in Smyrna was just one skirmish in the age-long war of Satan against God.

It has always been Satan's plan to attack god's children and attempt to destroy their faith. That is why one of his titles in Scripture is the **"accuser of the brethren" Rev 12:10**.

His attacks on God's true children, however, cannot succeed.

Jesus declared:

John 10:28-29

28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.

John 6:39

39 This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.

As their Great High Priest Jesus is able:

Heb 7:25

25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

This is beautiful, in Romans Paul traces the unbreakable chain from fore knowledge to predestination to effectual calling to justification to glorification; no one is lost along the way.

All who are called will be kept until they are made like Christ in glory.

The knowledge that Satan's efforts to destroy saving faith are doomed to failure does not deter Satan from trying.

Of course his most notable attack on saving faith is recorded in the book of Job, where (with God's permission) he took from Job his family, possessions, and physical health.

All Job was left with was a cantankerous wife and friends whose inept counsel drove him to distraction.

But, *"through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God" (Job 1:22; 2:10).*

Job's triumphant declaration, *"Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (Job 13:15)*, signaled both the triumph of true saving faith and Satan's utter defeat.

In the New Testament, Satan sought unsuccessfully to destroy Peter's faith.

Jesus warned Him:

Luke 22:31-32

31 And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.

32 But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren

As with the believers at Smyrna, Jesus foretold Satan's attack on Peter but also that Peter would successfully endure it.

Paul also survived the worst Satan could throw at him: Paul's response:

2 Cor 12:9-10

9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

God who alone sovereignly controls all the circumstances of life, would not permit Satan to torment the Smyrna church for long.

Jesus promised that they would **have tribulation for only ten days.**

Though some see the **ten days** as symbolically representing everything from ten periods of time, to a time of ten years, there is no exegetical reason to interpret them as anything other than ten actual days.

Satan's major assault on that local church would be intense, but brief.

THE COUNSEL

Rev 2:10b-11

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." '

As we said previously, Christ had no reprimand for the faithful church as Smyrna.

He closes the letter with some final words of encouraging counsel.

Those who prove the genuineness of their faith by remaining **faithful** to the Lord **until death** will receive as their reward **the crown** (*Stephanos*; **the victors crown**) **of life**

James 1:12

12 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

The **crown** (reward, culmination, outcome) of genuine saving faith is eternal **life**, and perseverance proves the genuineness of their faith as they endure suffering.

The Scriptures teach that true Christians will persevere.

That biblical truth was understood by the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith, who wrote "They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

That is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture: (*Matt 10:22; 24:13; Mark 4:13-20; John 8:31; Col 1:21-23; 1 John 2:19*) read

As we have seen and will see the phrase **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches** closes each of the seven letters.

It stresses the vital significance of what God says in Scripture, and emphasizes believers' responsibility to heed it.

The promise to **he who overcomes** (all Christians; we have talked about this before) is that he will **not be hurt by the second death**.

Though persecuted believers may suffer the first (physical) death, they will never experience the **second death** (which is not annihilation but conscious, eternal damnation in hell;

Rev 20:14; 21:8

14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

8 But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Not is the strongest negative the Greek language can express.

The persecuted suffering, yet faithful church at Smyrna stands for all time as an example of those who:

Luke 8:15

"have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance"

Because they loyally confessed Him before men, Jesus will confess them before the Father.

Matt 10:32

32 "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.