

Revelation

*Part Ten
Smyrna
(Revelation 2:8-11)*

With Study Questions

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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” (Revelation 2:8-11).

Introduction

I was not raised in the church and I have a pretty clear recollection of my assessment of Christians back in the sixties and seventies. They seemed a bit antiseptic and square. The ones who refused to participate in our shenanigans would also come off a little ‘holier than thou.’ In contemplating coming to faith, one of my early concerns (fear might be too strong a word here) was that I wouldn’t be considered cool or hip. And the prospect of being accused of self-righteousness or being judgmental was a put-off.

Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit had His way with me, and I was brought near to God by the power of God’s grace and His effectual calling. As I peruse the current cultural environment, I get the vivid impression that being accused of being antiseptic, square, uncool, self-righteous or judgmental while still (and always) on the list, are no longer at the top of the list of barriers to coming faith. New adjectives now ride shotgun on the stagecoach of the enemy’s efforts of dissuading the embracing of the Christian faith.

Last week we spoke of being accused of hatred and bigotry. Add to that, being outright evil. The younger generation of Christian (or potential

convert) must wrestle within a culture that has been convinced that Christian ethics are truly a dark enterprise. For example, the discussion revolving around what constitutes sanctioned amorous (sexual desire) has evolved in one short half-generation from “Why do you care about what I’m doing in the confines of my own home?” to “If you do not publicly endorse and sanction my passionate proclivities and allow your children to be catechized thusly, you are an evil person and should be ostracized from public discourse.”

It may very well, in this generation, become illegal to teach (even from a pulpit), that intimacy should be confined to marriage and that marriage should be between a biological male and a biological female.

I open with this for a couple of reasons: For one, I want us to be sensitive to the challenges facing our young people (and the rest of us). You may think if election/predestination is true, cultural pressures should not matter. I don’t think Jesus would agree. Though it is universally “**impossible**” to be saved apart from God’s grace (Matthew 19:26), Jesus (and a great deal of other Scripture) indicated that the distractions of wealth (and a general love of the world) can be formidable and difficult to contend with. Also (before you start praising God that you’re not wealthy), most within the sound of my voice, both historically and culturally, would find themselves in the wealthy category. Most of us live in a world that is quite nice to us.

Second, the “**do not fear**” category of this passage, though referring to potential martyrdom, applies to any of us who are unwilling, under a lesser threat, to “**be faithful.**” If we’re not faithful to say ‘no’ to the current cultural and social trends and ethics by which we are surrounded, what makes us think we will be “**faithful until death?**”

There is a biblical principle telling us that if we’re not faithful in small things, we won’t be faithful in greater things (Luke 16:10). What we will see in this letter from Jesus to Smyrna is an example (the one example of the seven) of a faithful church. But their faithfulness did not exempt them from intense difficulties which will lie ahead.

Smyrna

Smyrna was about 35-50 miles north of Ephesus as we follow this letter through the Roman postal route. Smyrna was a beautiful city, known as the “lovely crown-the ornament of Asia.” It was a rich area and highly

competitive in terms of trade. In 580 BC the city was leveled then rebuilt in 290 BC as a planned city. It was known for having streets of gold (of some sort). In 195 BC they erected a temple to the goddess of Rome (they had to win that “honor” even before Rome came to power).

Smyrna was a hub of emperor worship. They had built a temple to Tiberius (the Caesar from AD 14-37). It was also famous for its athletic games. Smyrna was also famous for a large colony of Jews who were highly influential with the Roman authorities and, similar to the Pharisees, hostile to Christians.

We have learned from history that Polycarp (one of the last living students of the Apostle John-the writer of Revelation) was the bishop of Smyrna in 155 AD. Polycarp, at the age of eighty-six was arrested for his faith. The proconsul threatened him that he would be torn apart by wild beasts unless he denied Christ and offered just a pinch of incense in worship of Caesar, acknowledging Caesar as Lord. Polycarp responded:

Fourscore and six years have I served him, and he has never done me injury; how then can I now blaspheme my King and savior?

Polycarp was then threatened to be burned with fire. The Sabbatarians (likely some relationship to the “synagogue of Satan” in this passage) of the day actually gathered wood on the sabbath for this event. Again, we have a record of Polycarp’s response:

You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and after a little while is extinguished but are ignorant of the coming fire that is reserved for the ungodly. So why do you delay? Do whatever you will.

Polycarp was burned and was refused an honorable burial in hopes of sending a message to the church. It did not have the desired effect! To the text:

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 (Revelation 2:8).

Again, the “**angel**” is likely the pastor who is called to deliver the message to the congregation. The title (First and Last, dead and came to life) chosen for this letter may have to do with things that happened in Smyrna. The city itself had died and rose again in a sense. There was also a fable that the idol Dionysus had died and came to life. This title may have been designed to counter that.

But it seems so reasonable to conclude that since this church is about to undergo a fiery trial, which may include death for some, that they are reminded of Christ’s control of human history from First to Last (as God Himself), and His actual victory over death. The Christian is to live their life with ever an eye on and hope in the resurrection.

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 (Revelation 2:9).

Though the city was rich, the members of this church were not. It was not an easy place to be a Christian. As we shall see (later in Revelation), trade unions required declaring an allegiance to Caesar. Their “**tribulation**” means they were oppressed and afflicted. Their “**poverty**” was literal. It was likely very difficult for them to function in society and make ends meet. And all of this likely had something to do with their faithfulness. The message of the Prosperity Gospel had clearly missed this region.

We need to ever ask ourselves what we’re willing to sacrifice in order to maintain our faithfulness. Whether it has to do with income, education, social advancement, creature comforts, etc. Are we willing to remain, or descend, to the lower ladder of our culture? Are we willing to be poor in the world’s eyes if that’s what it takes to be “**rich toward God**” (Luke 12:21)? As the author of Hebrews writes:

...for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven (Hebrews 10:34).

One can barely read a few chapters in their Bibles without coming across lessons on the deceptiveness of riches. To what extent do we believe

and embrace the estimation of Christ, as we read in this passage, of what actually makes a person rich.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, ¹⁹ thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

The “**blasphemy**” of which John writes amounts to reviling accusations, likely against the church (of which I spoke in the introduction). Don’t expect accolades from the world when they discover you’re a follower of Christ. Jesus made that very clear. If they went after Him, they will go after those who follow Him (John 15:20).

Jesus knows who the antagonists are. They are religious. Anyone who has even cracked a history book knows of the twentieth century bloodbath perpetrated by dictators who were avowed communist/atheists. Their lack of willingness to bow the knee to Christ resulted in the slaughter of tens of millions of innocents. Yet in Scripture and throughout the course of history, false religion has been the greatest soul-damning enterprise. The greatest detractors of Jesus were priests.

This will come to the fore more and more as we go through Revelation, but for now we must realize that “those who say they are Jews and are not” are ethnic Jews, or as Paul put it his “**countrymen according to the flesh**” (**Romans 9:3**). To make a very long story very brief, Paul will teach that God is not going to entirely remove the Jews from the equation of redemption. Romans 9-11 teaches of a significant conversion of Jews to Christ. But what we should never do (and this is a major conviction in today’s popular eschatology) is teach that apart from Christ, any ethnic group has a favored status in the eyes of God.

These detractors of which Jesus speaks, though ethnic Jews, according to Jesus are not Jews at all. As Paul writes:

...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 (Romans 2:29).

I believe it should be the Christian conviction, (especially in light of the fact that the Scriptures teach of Jews coming to faith) that we should love and evangelize Jewish people (all people for that matter). I remember teaching this at a conference followed by a Christian brother, meeting me in the hallway and putting his finger in my chest and telling me “You better watch yourself!” He viewed God’s promise to Abraham (“**I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you**” Genesis 12:3), as a requirement to declare a certain ethnic group as favored of God by virtue of their blood and/or political affiliation. Would this man have issued the same warning against Jesus who, so far from viewing this ethno/religious community as favored by God, but rather a “**Synagogue of Satan?**”

Before we move on, let’s keep one thing in mind in light of this passage. In the same way that the synagogues, which were made up of God’s covenant people, could become a synagogue of Satan, today’s churches, if they lose their love and faithfulness, can become synagogues of Satan as well. Let us take heed. I believe our confession says it well.

The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will (Westminster Confession of Faith, 25, 5).

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 (Revelation 2:10).

You might think the “**First and the Last,**” that One in control of history, would simply deliver His people from peril. The undeniable message to those receiving this letter is that they “**are about to suffer.**” It is the very common practice of God, not to immediately deliver us from suffering, but to see us through our suffering. Jesus refers to it here at being “**tested.**” It is a refining. It is the means by which God conforms us into the image of Christ, who was made “**perfect through suffering**” (Hebrews 2:10).

Whatever the difficulty was going to be, it would last **“ten days.”** Ten days is used elsewhere in Scripture as a time of testing. When Daniel refused to eat the king’s food, he asked that they observe their appearance after ten days (Daniel 1:12-15). Ten days also indicates a brief trial. Our very lives are, by biblical standards, brief, a **“handbreadth” (Psalm 39:5).** Jesus weighs this against the eternal **“crown of life.”**

Before we close, it might help for us to grasp the machinations of Jesus’ warning. It’s not as if the devil directly throws people into prison. As I’ve mentioned many times, the two adversaries being addressed in Revelation are religious (Jerusalem) and political (Rome). The means by which this testing/imprisonment takes place is by Satan, winning the religious community, the Synagogue of Satan, influencing Rome, the civil authorities who had the power to imprison.

What happened to Polycarp was similar to what happened to Jesus. It begins with Satan (who entered Judas to betray Him-Luke 22:3), then moves to the religious community (the Pharisees: Matthew 12:14; Mark 3:6; Luke 6:11; John 5:18, etc.), then to the political authorities (Pilate-Matthew 27). But ultimately, as with Paul’s thorn in the flesh, it is God’s ordained plan for the refinement of His own people.

We admire people who are faithful unto death. But being faithful unto death must always, ultimately be in the service of Christ. To die for a lesser god is tragic. For there is a **“second death”** that is much worse than the first.

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 (Revelation 2:11).

The great promise to those who overcome-who persevere in the faith even in the face of the greatest devastations the devil and humanity can bring against us-is the great and eternal deliverance from that **“second death.”** It is to vanquish that second death that Jesus went to the cross and rose again. Interestingly enough, all indications are that the church in Smyrna stands to this day.

Questions for Study

1. Do you recall what you thought it meant to be a Christian before you were a Christian? What do you think are some of the greatest deterrents of people coming to faith (pages 2, 3)?
2. What was Polycarp called to do by the Roman proconsul? How did he respond? Is it possible that these types of things are still happening today (page 4)?
3. Why do you suppose Jesus uses the title He chose for the opening of this letter (page 5)?
4. Discuss riches and poverty from a Christian perspective. What does it mean to be rich toward God (pages 5, 6)?
5. Is it possible for anyone to have favored status before God apart from Christ? Explain how that applies to those who were the detractors of the church in Smyrna (pages 6, 7).
6. How can a church become a synagogue of Satan (page 7)?
7. Why does God ordain difficulties for His children (pages 7, 8)?
8. What does Jesus call us to do and what is His promise (page 8)?