

~REVELATION~

Lesson 8- The Letter to Smyrna

We are continuing our study of Revelation and specifically looking at the 7- letters to the 7 churches in which Jesus writes a personal letter to each of these churches and to us even 2,000 years later. And we are learning that these letters are like report cards, grading the Church on their faithfulness to the mission of carrying the Light for Jesus.

We, the Church are His vessel to accomplish His will in the earth. To shine the Light of the Gospel even in the midst of a perverse and dark world. And as we shine His Light, His will is magnified in us, and He gives us strength to carry out this mission. And we need His strength, because with this responsibility comes a tremendous amount of struggles and persecution. So why is this? Because the enemy hates the light and as we shine the Light, we are exposing the darkness of this world... and the world hates their evil deeds to be exposed, Ephesians 5:8-13; **John 3:19-20**. This is why Jesus is writing these letters; to encourage us to persevere and endure to the end giving us great promises to the overcomer who does.

These letters are representing the Church Age as a whole and they are vital to understand because each one of them speaks to us today and they give us the expectations that Jesus has of His Church. Remember that in each letter there are 7 components: 1) The Name of the Church; 2) Jesus' Title; 3) Commendation; 4) Concern; 5) Exhortation; 6) Promise to the Overcomer; 7) The Key Phrase, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And within these 7 parts there are four applications 1) Local; 2) The Church as a Whole; 3) Personal; 4) Prophetic. This is our guideline as we go through each one of the letters.

We are now in the second letter of seven, the letter to the church of Smyrna. It is only 4 verses, but it is packed with some amazing Truths. Let's begin by reading this letter then we will begin unpacking it verse by verse, **Revelation 2:8-11**.

Notice first that this letter is being written, "**to the angel of the church in Smyrna...**", or as we have said, the ἄγγελος, the messenger or the overseer of the church of Smyrna. This was probably a man by the name Polycarp (69-155ad). He was a student of the Apostle John, and by the end of the first century, he became the Bishop of Smyrna, probably appointed by John himself, Eusebius Ecclesiastical History book IV chapter 14, pg 337. Polycarp, being God's faithful messenger, then would give this letter to the church of Smyrna and then share this letter with all the other churches. Polycarp was a faithful leader and a well-known Christian in all of Asia. And as a result, he became a faithful martyr for Jesus in Smyrna. We will talk more about Polycarp and his martyrdom at the end of this lesson.

CHURCH NAME: 2:8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write..."

Each one of the names of these 7 churches has a purpose to the theme of the letter. In this case, Smyrna, Σμύρνα, is the Greek word for Myrrh. Myrrh is a gum resin produced by a small, thorny desert shrub in the Middle East. It is most commonly used for embalming and anointing for burial and carries with it a sense of death. The magi from the east gave Jesus gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh, representing Jesus' Royalty, Priesthood and Death, Matt 2:11. Nicodemus brought a mixture of Myrrh and aloes for the burial of Jesus, John 19:39. So this incense is associated with death and burial, but something very interesting about Myrrh is that it begins yielding its fragrance as it is being crushed and then if it is burned, it gives off its full scent. Which we will see has huge implications to this letter. Smyrna was being crushed by persecution and many Christians were facing persecution and death for the sake of the Name of Jesus.

In the first century, Smyrna was a thriving, wealthy port city in Asia Minor and it still exists today as Izmir, Turkey. (Turkish rendering for the Greek name Smyrna, Σμύρνα.) Currently, Izmir is Turkey's third largest city and is the second busiest port in that country. And even in the first century it was a very

prosperous city because of the trade and commerce of this large port. In addition to its wealth, this city had the favor of the Roman Empire. After Alexander the Great, Smyrna became part of the Seleucid Empire, but around 195bc, the city was overtaken by the Roman Empire and in honor of the Romans, Smyrna built a temple to the goddess Roma, the spirit of Rome, in order to gain favor with Rome. And later in 26ad Smyrna built a temple in honor of the Roman Emperor Tiberius and it became the major city to promote Caesar worship. In fact, the Roman orator Cicero, called the city of Smyrna “Rome’s most faithful and ancient ally.” M. Tullius Cicero, Orations, The fourteen orations



against Marcus Antonius (Philippics) 11.2.5 Many of the Roman Emperors would demand that they be worshipped as god and they demanded their citizens to pronounce that, “Caesar is Lord.” Which was a major problem for Christians because only Jesus is Lord. Later at the end of the first century, during the time of John and the Revelation, Emperor Domitian decreed that all in his empire worship him as god. *The Worship of Roman Emperors*, Henry Burton; www.britannica.com/biography/Domitian And if someone refused, as many Christians did, they would be deemed as a traitor to the empire, and many were tortured and killed for their defiance. Therefore, Smyrna, although prosperous, was an extremely dangerous place for Christians to live.

JESUS’ TITLE: 2:8) “These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:”

Like all of Jesus’ titles, this is drawn from the description in chapter 1, Revelation 1:17–18-¹⁷ *And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen.* Jesus is the One who has always existed and will always be existing, and this title gives the hope of Eternal life to those who believe in Him. It is a title of Comfort; Jesus is the Comforter. John had fallen down as dead because of the awesome sight of Jesus, but Jesus comforts him saying, “Do not be afraid, I AM...” In the same way, Jesus comforts those who are being persecuted for His Name and says in verse 10, “**Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer.**” Don’t fear, I AM with you, I AM the First and the Last, and I too was dead and have come to life. Jesus is our High Priest and there is nothing we will go through that Jesus hasn’t already experienced. This brings us to the commendation...

COMMENDATION: 2:9) “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 Jesus says, “I know...” I know what you are going through. What a sense of comfort this brings that Jesus, the Almighty God of the universe knows and sees what I am going through. There were 4 things that Jesus knew...

- 1) I know... your **works**: He commends them for their good works, and as we learned in the first letter to Ephesus, these are the faithful works of the heart to keep Jesus as first place in all things. They hadn’t left their first love. They were holding onto Jesus with everything they had.
- 2) I know... your **tribulation**: This word is θλιψις, persecution, pressure. I know the immense amount of pressure on you. But I need to clarify that this is not “The Great Tribulation.” There is a big difference between tribulation from the enemy as a result of shining the Light of Jesus, compared to “The Great Tribulation,” which is a result of God’s wrath being poured out on an unbelieving world.
- 3) I know... your **poverty**: This word doesn’t just mean you’re barely getting by. This is deep and complete poverty, as in, you have nothing at all. But Jesus says in contrast, “**But you are rich.**”

Persecution and poverty will usually go hand in hand because when Christians are deemed evil doers, as in the case for much of history, we are viewed as outcasts to society. In the case of Smyrna, they wouldn’t pay allegiance to Ceasar as Lord, so they couldn’t get a job, they couldn’t buy anything, they weren’t

allowed in social settings... they were outcasts. We saw hints of this with COVID-19. And that was just a small dose of what is to come. We also see this in the book of Hebrews as the Jews were coming to Christ in Jerusalem, they were being ridiculed and outcast from the Jewish community and society, **Hebrews 10:32-39**. Jesus tells us to look to our reward in heaven, not to things on the earth, **Matthew 6:19-21**. We are storing up treasures in heaven. Treasures that are eternal. This is why Jesus says, “but you are rich.” Do you want your reward now or in eternal life? Jesus sees the end from the beginning and tells us that if we choose Him, we are rich beyond measure. Not rich in this life, but rich in eternal life with Jesus because we are heirs to the King. We have been given an inheritance of Jesus Christ, **2 Cor 8:9**. This is in direct contrast to something Jesus says to the final church of Laodicea who think they are rich, but they are very poor, **Revelation 3:17-18**. Don’t give up eternal life, for “your best life now.”

Notice the fourth thing that Jesus knows...

4) I know... the **blasphemy** of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Even among the persecution from the Roman Empire, the Jews were incessant to ally with Rome to condemn the Christians to death. We saw this multiple times through the book of Acts when Jews would gain the favor of Roman authorities to do their dirty work, Acts 9:23-25; 2 Cor 11:32-33; Acts 13:50; 14:19; 17:5; 18:6, 12-16; 21:27; 24:27; 25:1-3. This is happening again with the church of Smyrna. Remember Jesus said in John 16:2- ... *the time is coming that whosoever kills you will think that he offers God service*. Religious authorities have been the main culprit behind Christian persecution for 2,000 years. Jesus says, they say they are Jews and are not. They were probably Jews by birth, but Jesus isn’t speaking of their physical lineage, but the condition of their heart. Remember His rebuke to the Pharisees in John 8:37-44. Paul also explains this in Romans 2:28-29.

In Smyrna, there was major persecution from all sides; major pressure, θλίψις, from the Jews and the Roman Empire, but notice the exhortation from Jesus on how to handle this in the next verse...

CONCERN: Notice there is no concern from Jesus in this letter, so He goes straight to the exhortation...

EXHORTATION/INSTRUCTION: 2:10) 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.

Jesus doesn’t promise that He will stop this intense persecution and pressure from the enemy. In fact, He tells them to endure and be faithful until death. We are His vessels of Light on the earth. God’s will is magnified in us so that whole world might hear the Gospel and come to the knowledge of the Truth. But the enemy hates this and doesn’t like their evil deeds exposed. Persecution goes hand in hand with our faith. All through the Bible, Christians are promised to suffer persecution, **2 Tim 3:12**. Jesus personally tells us this, **Matthew 5:11-16**; John 15:18-21; 16:1-4, 33. Most of the New Testament speaks of persecution and as we learned from the book of Acts, Paul dealt with massive persecution for preaching the gospel. Jesus promised this to Paul after his conversion on the road to Damascus, Acts 9:15-16; 14:22. And Paul was constantly encouraging the Church to endure this persecution for the sake of Christ, 1 Thess 1:6; 3:3; 2 Tim 1:8.

Jesus loves us and He knows the hardship of shining the Light in the midst of a perverse world and so within the process of suffering for His Name, God built in a supernatural reward that comes as a result. It is the reward of Eternal Life with Eternal Glory. This is a big subject, but one of my favorites in the Bible and it is the reward of ruling and reigning with Jesus as His Bride for all eternity. And the gift that distinguishes this to us is the στέφανος stephanos crown. Jesus mentions this at the end of verse 10 saying, **Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

This is an amazing reward to the Christian; to the one who is faithful and endures to the end, even until death. The Bible speaks extensively of this subject and over the course of our study through the book of Revelation, specifically chapters 4 and 5, we will be speaking of this promise of Eternal Life with Eternal

Glory. Here are a few references to whet your appetite, but we will be studying this at length in the weeks to come, 2 Timothy 2:8-12; James 1:2-3, 12-13; Romans 5:3-5; 8:16-17; 2 Cor 4:17.

This reward of Eternal Life with Eternal Glory is given to the faithful and it is represented in the form of a stephanos crown. The stephanos crown symbolizes victory to the one who overcomes. Every one of these 7 letters has a promise to the overcomer and we will see the stephanos crown mentioned many times in the book of Revelation. The Bible speaks specifically of three stephanos crowns of victory to the faithful, to those who endure to the end: 1) the crown of Righteousness, 2 Tim 4:7-8; 2) the crown of Glory, 1 Pet 5:4; and 3) the crown of Life, Rev 2:10; James 1:12. Jesus promises the crown of Life to the persecuted Christians in Smyrna, and James also mentions the crown of Life, **James 1:12**. These stephanos crowns are such a big subject in the book of Revelation because there is a very specific group of Christians that are wearing these crowns... we will talk about this when we get to chapter 4. These Smyrnaean Christians are promised stephanos crowns of life **IF** they are faithful to the end. That's the requirement to obtaining this promise, our faithfulness. Do you love Jesus with all your heart? Is He first place in your life and will you love Him even unto death?

Notice the promise the overcomer is connected to the theme of this letter...

PROMISE TO THE OVERCOMER: 2:11) ... He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.

Jesus says that they are going to die for His Name's sake, but they won't be hurt by the second death. The second death is defined at the end of Revelation, **Revelation 20:14-15**. This is the promise of eternal life with Jesus and to never be separated from Him. Those who have been born again will never die spiritually in the lake of fire. We are spiritual beings which means we are eternal beings and can never cease to exist. So, to die spiritually means to be separated from God eternally. The promise to the faithful Christian who overcomes is we will never be separated from Jesus. The Greek is very emphatic with a double negative saying, "we will **not never** be hurt by the second death."

KEY PHRASE: 2:7) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

God is speaking... will you listen? And to those who hear these words, the Holy Spirit is working in us to bring us to glory.

The Local application in the 1st century: As discussed already, these were real issues that the church of Smyrna was dealing with as Emperor Domitian was persecuting the Christians and the unbelieving Jews were antagonizing the situation.

The Whole Church application: Be a part of a church that is not scared to stand for Truth. One that won't compromise under pressure. I believe that if the Lord tarries much longer, the True church in America will have to go underground because Christians will be decreed enemies of the state. And any church that can stay in good standing with the government regulations won't actually be a church of Jesus Christ.

Personal application: Be faithful until the end; even to death and you will have the reward of Eternal Life with Eternal Glory as the Bride of Christ.

Prophetic application: History of the Church and the Bible: The church of Smyrna is representing the "Persecuted Church" of the first few centuries. There was a prophetic statement that Jesus made in verse 10 when He said, "**You will have tribulation ten days.**" These ten days could be relating to 10 eras of Christian persecution under 10 different Roman Emperors.

The 10 Eras of Christian Persecution under the Roman Empire

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| 1) Nero 54-68 | 6) Maximinus 235-238 |
| 2) Domitian 81-96 | 7) Decius 249-251 |
| 3) Trajan 98-117 | 8) Valerian 253-260 |
| 4) Marcus Aurelius 161-180 | 9) Aurelian 270-275 |
| 5) Septimus Severus 193-211 | 10) Diocletian 284-305 (Worst of all) |

Over the next few centuries, up until 313ad when Constantine takes power in Rome, the Church is persecuted violently. Over the course of these three centuries, each of these 10 Emperors and their hatred for Christianity is detailed in Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History. We don't know the exact number of martyrs during this time, but it was at a minimum hundreds of thousands, and Foxes Book of Martyrs even suggests the number could be in the millions of Christians who would not reject Jesus Christ and chose to be faithful, even until death and receive a lasting and enduring possession in heaven.

But even among this intense persecution, faithful men, known as the ante-Nicene church fathers, (the time between the Apostles and the Council of Nicaea), these men carried the Light of the Gospel to the world and were faithful to the Truth. Men such as Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Lucian of Antioch, and Eusebius, just to name a few. It is because of these men, and their faithfulness to God's Word, is the reason why we now have the established canon of the New Testament and the pure doctrine of the faith. Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr have many writings quoting from the New Testament books as Scripture. Irenaeus wrote a 5-volume book called, "Against Heresies," that refuted the heresy of the Gnostics. Origen was possibly the greatest scholar of that age. Eusebius gave us the first History of the Early Church and preserved many writings of the early fathers that are no longer extant. And finally, Lucian of Antioch, a faithful man who dedicated his life to preserving the pure Word of God. It is because of Lucian that we now have the Textus Receptus preserved for us. He knew of the corruption of the Gnostics and their destruction of the Bible, so he set out to preserve our New Testament in its original form which we know as the Textus Receptus. And when Constantine took power, he recognized the work of Lucian and had scribes copy his preserved New Testament and kept them safe in Constantinople. This was the origin of the Byzantine texts of the New Testament and the origin of the Textus Receptus. This is how God was preserving His Word.

Many of these church fathers during this time of persecution in this ante-Nicene period, died the death of martyrdom for their faith. So to end our lesson, I want to share the account of the martyrdom of the beloved Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, and faithful believer. His faithfulness to the end is something we as Christians can read and cherish and be encouraged and our faith will be strengthened as we relate this story to what we have learned in this short letter to the church of Smyrna.



Polycarp: Eusebius Ecclesiastical History Book IV, chapters 14-15