

TEXT SERMONS

SERIES: REVELATION CHAPTERS 1-3

MESSAGE #5

SMYRNA

“THE POVERTY-STRICKEN, RICH CHURCH”

REV. 2:8-11

The letters of our Lord are recorded in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of The Revelation Of Jesus Christ. The first letter was to the church in the city of Ephesus – chapter 2:1-7. It was “The Church That Loved And Left” – they had left their first love. We come now to Revelation 2:8-11 and the letter of our Lord to the church in the city of Smyrna – or, as I have titled it, “The Poverty-Stricken, Rich Church.”

Our plan for developing each study is the same for each letter: We will learn something about the PLACE; the POSTURE of Christ as He approaches each church; His PRAISE for the church – if there is anything to praise (and there are two churches that were not praise-worthy); the PROBLEM in the church if there is a problem (and there are two churches that had no problem that Jesus addressed; the Prescription for church (i.e. how the problem is to be dealt with); and, lastly, the PROMISE to the church. This is our plan of procedure. Now, let us consider the church in the city of Smyrna.

I. THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH

The historical background helps us understand the challenges that each particular church faced. The name of the city, its location and unique features have their impact upon each of the seven churches.

A. Its Name.

“Smyrna” = The word “smyrna” is the Greek word for “myrrh.” When the wise men came from the East to worship the child Jesus, they “presented to Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11).

“Myrrh” was associated with suffering and death. The soldiers offered Jesus myrrh when He was suffering on the cross: “they gave Him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: (Greek “smyrna”) but He would not receive it.” (Mark 15:23)

“Myrrh” was one of the ingredients for embalming a body for burial (John 19:39). All this is of significance for the church in the city of Smyrna that was undergoing great persecution, suffering and even death. Spurgeon said of the Smyrna church, “It has been called Sweet-smelling Smyrna, the poorest and the purest of the seven.” (Spurgeon’s Devotional Bible)

B. Its Location.

Smyrna was a costal city about 35 miles north of Ephesus and is today known as Izmir in Turkey. It had a magnificent harbor which protruded into the heart of the city. It was a safe harbor – in the time of war it could be closed by a chain across its mouth.

Smyrna is one of only two cities remaining today of the seven to which Jesus sent a letter. Also, of the seven cities the only two that are still in existence are Philadelphia, presently called Ala Sheher, and Smyrna – the two churches that Jesus did not rebuke! More about that in another message. Turkey is an Islamic country today and Smyrna is the only city in Turkey that is considered a “Christian city.” There is presently a large Christian population there.

C. Its Description.

Smyrna was a great trade city. Because it was a great seaport, it abounded in wealth and trade.

Smyrna was a great sports city. It had the largest stadium in Asia Minor and in that stadium hundreds of Christians perished as they were put to death in various ways because of their faith in Christ.

Smyrna was a cultural city. It had a famous library and the largest public theatre in Asia Minor. It was the birthplace of Homer, the Greek epic poet. (Two of the greatest works in western literature, the Iliad and the Odyssey, are attributed to him.) Smyrna was called “a paradise of municipal vanity.” So we can understand the consternation of this society when Christianity was introduced into this very secular minded city. Consequently, persecution was the result as we shall see.

Smyrna was a rich city. Its citizens were on the average wealthy, having many servants. There was a wide gap between the rich and the poor. Christians were among the poorest and were considered to be rabble and scum.

Smyrna was a beautiful city. It was called “The Glory of Asia”; “The Ornament of Asia”; “The Crown of Asia”; “The Flower of Asia” by various writers. Lucian said that it was “the fairest of cities”; Aristides said, “grace extends over every part like a rainbow.”

It was known for its great, straight streets the most famous being called “The Golden Street.” This was lined with statues to various gods and heathen temples such as the temples to Apollo, Aphrodite, Sousse, and the greatest was the temple of Cybele.

Smyrna was the center of emperor worship. Smyrna was the first city to erect a temple to emperor worship and was known as the center of Emperor worship. Once a year every Roman citizen must burn a pinch of incense on the altar to the emperor and having done so was given a certificate to prove that he or she was a loyal citizen. Every Roman citizen had to make that sacrifice and receive a certificate proving that they had done so. If any citizen refused to burn that pinch of incense to Cesar, he was automatically branded as disloyal and was considered an outlaw and was persecuted and many died.

This was the city in which was a band of Christians who were loyal to Jesus Christ. The followers of Christ in Smyrna lived in an environment which, on every side, they were faced with opulence, wealth and heathen worship.

It would seem easy for the little church in Smyrna to have been snuffed out by the weight of so much heathen worship and persecution. It was not easy to be a Christian in Smyrna. But all the darkness in the world cannot quench the smallest light that has been kindled and kept by God.

Such was the location of the Poverty-Stricken, Rich Church. So much for the place of the church to which Jesus sent His second letter.

II. THE POSTURE OF CHRIST.

The posture of Christ, as He reveals Himself to each church, is suggestive of the condition of that particular church. For example, the posture of Christ as He approached the church in Ephesus was one of inspection: “He who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.” (2:1) He approaches Pergamos as follows: “These things says he who has the sharp two-edged sword.” (2:12) Then Thyatira: “He who has eyes like a flame of fire.” (2:18) In each instance His posture indicates that there is a problem that needs correcting.

However, when Jesus addresses the church in Smyrna, His posture is different: “These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life....” (2:8) Notice that to John He had said the same thing but the order is reversed: “I am he who lives and was dead.” (1:18) Why the change? This statement to the Smyrnan Church had great significance: the words “and came to life” refer to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That statement is very, very interesting considering the history of Smyrna.

You see, Smyrna was a city that had died, then came to life again. Nearly 600 years before Christ it had been destroyed by enemies, totally annihilated. Then it had been rebuilt and at the writing of this letter it was called “the Glory Of Asia.” A resurrected city was being addressed by a resurrected Christ!

Therefore, when Jesus said He had been dead “and came to life” – the statement really registered with the persecuted, poor, blasphemed Christians in Smyrna, some of whom were yet to become martyrs for Christ because the threat of death hung poised over every Christian in Smyrna.

These words, “who was dead, and came to life” are a great encouragement to us also. We sing, “Because He lives, I can face tomorrow; because He lives all fear is gone and life is worth the living just because He lives.”

III. THE PRAISE FOR THE CHURCH.

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.” Note the words: “I know.” What does He say He knows? Four things:

A. “I Know Your Works.”

This church was working in spite of opposition. They had not given up. It has been said that, “The doors of opportunity swing on the hinges of opposition.” We’ve heard it said in

our day, “It is so hard to work for Christ today.” We ought to be ashamed! We have it relatively easy. We are not living under threat of death if we work for Christ in our country. Jesus said, “I know your works”. He knows our works as well. None will go unnoticed or unrewarded – for He says “Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work.” (Rev.22:12)

B. I Know Your “Tribulation.”

The Greek word translated “tribulation” is “thlipsis” which means “to be crushed beneath a weight”. Verse 9 identifies one source of their oppression as being Jews. This is not the first time that the law keeping Jews had persecuted the grace preaching Christians. It happened in Antioch, Acts 13:50; in Iconium, and Lystra, Acts 14; in Thessalonica, Acts 17. Jesus called this particular group of Jews in Smyrna, “the synagogue of Satan.”

These Christians in Smyrna were being crushed beneath severe pressures and Jesus said, “I know”. He knows our afflictions, our trials, temptations and tribulations. Does Jesus care? Listen to the answer that a familiar song gives us:

“Does Jesus care when my heart is pained?
Too deeply for mirth and song?
As the burdens press, and the cares distress
And the way grows weary and long?

O yes, He cares, I know He cares!
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
I know my Savior cares.”

C. I Know Your “Poverty.”

There are two Greek words for poverty: one describes the person who is not wealthy but has enough to satisfy his needs. That is not the word used here. The other is a word that means “complete destitution.” That is the word used here. Smyrna was the wealthiest of cities, and yet the Christians there were poor to the point of destitution. There is a reason for their poverty, as we shall see next.

D. “I Know The Blasphemy.....”

Nearly half the population of Smyrna were Jews. Jesus refers to this in v.9 where He says, “I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.” He knew about the enemies of His church in Smyrna. He said, “I know their blasphemies” – the Greek is “blasphemia” and is translated both as “blasphemy” and “slander.”

These Jews instigated riots against the Christians, blaspheming and slandering them. That was only the beginning! History records that they pillaged the Christians. These Jews were allowed to keep for themselves 10% of all the goods that they confiscated from Christians. Therefore, many of the Christians were homeless, naked and literally starving.

It was against this background that Jesus said, "I know your poverty." He could have said, "I came unto my own and my own received me not; they cast lots for my garments as I hung on the cross; I was hungry and they gave me no food; naked and they clothed me not; foxes had holes and the birds of the air had nests but I had no place to lay my head – I know what you are going through, I care."

The writer of the Book of Hebrews writes: "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven." (Heb. 10:34)

Do not overlook the parentheses in v.9: "*but you are rich.*" Here is one of the great paradoxes of Scripture. Here is a seeming contradiction. It is contrary to common sense and yet it is true! Smyrna, the Poverty-Stricken, Rich church! How encouraging this phrase must have been to this bedraggled band of believers! Jesus said, "you are rich."

To the last church to which Jesus sent a letter, Laodicea, He said, "you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." (Rev.3:17) What a contrast between the church in Smyrna and the church in Laodicea! Laodicea was the church that was rich but Christ said they were poor; Smyrna was the church that was poor but Christ said they were rich!

How do we measure riches? By the tangible or the intangible? The Apostle Paul spoke of those who were "poor yet making many rich" in II Cor. 6:10; Timothy writes about being "rich in good works" in I Tim. 6:18; James wrote of those who were "the poor of this world" yet they were "rich in faith." James 2:5. Dr. Lehman Strauss wrote, "The churches of the first 3 centuries were marked by persecution and poverty. Today churches are known for their popularity and wealth." It has been said that money will buy:

- a bed, but not sleep;
- books, but not brains;
- food, but not appetite;
- a house, but not a home;
- medicine, but not health;
- sin's pleasures, but not salvation's peace!

Better to be a poor man and a Christian than to be a rich man and a sinner!

"The treasures of earth are not mine,
I hold not its silver and gold;
But a treasure far greater is mine;
I have riches of value untold."

The Poverty-Stricken, Rich Church received the highest praise of any of the seven churches when Jesus said, "you are rich." Three little words, "you are rich," made all the difference. He reported to them the balance of their account in heaven's bank!

IV. THE PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH.

Ordinarily, at this point in the letters, Jesus would cite the problems that He found in the

church - He would censure the church, but there was nothing amiss in the Smyrna church. The Lord of the Lampstands, the Christ of the Candlesticks had nothing good to say about the church in Sardis as we shall see when we get to Chapter 3; He had nothing bad to say about the church in Smyrna. What does He say about us? Any problems in our churches today that the Lord Jesus would address if He wrote letters directly to them?

V. THE PRESCRIPTION FOR THE CHURCH.

Since there was no problem for Jesus to address in the church in Smyrna, there is no prescription or correction given. So we move on to:

VI. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH

Rev 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."

Note how Jesus prefaces His promise of things to come with the words, "Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer." He counsels them not to fear what lies ahead and then He promises three difficulties that these already oppressed and distressed believers would be facing:

A. Prison For Some

"...the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested...", This is both a warning and a promise. The early apostles and other Christians had seen the inside of many prisons.

Vance Havner, one of my favorite writers, wrote: "In a day of quick prosperity and give-a-way shows, it is not easy to interest a well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed Sunday morning crowd in the Smyrna brand of loyalty. We sing about the reproach of the cross and then hurry home to a big dinner and TV. What have we ever suffered for Christ?"

No church suffered more than Smyrna, yet Jesus said, "you are rich." When faithfulness to Christ is most difficult, it is most necessary. Suffering was nothing new for the early church. Adversity is not always a mark of God's disfavor. These believers who were to be imprisoned were to earn the Lord's favor, not His disfavor. And so have many others down through the centuries. He then promised:

B. Persecution For Some.

"....and you will have tribulation ten days" What does "ten days" mean? There are a number of views:

It has been suggested by some that this statement refers to the persecution of Christians by the Roman government under 10 Roman Emperors beginning with Nero in 64 A.D. and ending with Diocletian in 284 A.D. This was a period a period of 220 years.

However, this is not what Jesus meant by “ten days.” The reason: By the time Jesus sent this letter the first Emperor, Nero, had ended his reign. Domitian was now the Emperor and his reign was half over. So one and one-half Emperor’s reigns had already passed by the time of this letter.

The most likely explanation for the “ten days” is this: The number 10 is often used in scripture to indicate a period of testing – it is an indefinite period of time, usually short rather than long. For instance:

- Genesis 31:7 - Jacob accused Laban of changing his wages “ten times”;
- Numbers 14:22 - God said the children of Israel “have put Me to the test now these ten times.”
- Nehemiah 4:12 - Nehemiah, speaking of the enemy’s threats said, “they told us ten times, “From whatever place you turn, they will be upon us.”
- Job 19:3 - Job says of his so-called friends, “These ten times you have reproached me.”
- Daniel 1:14 - Nebuchadnezzar tested the 3 Hebrews - “he tested them ten days.”
- There are the 10 plagues in Egypt, etc.

Historian William Barclay says, “The expression ‘ten days’ is the normal Greek expression for a short time.” However long, it was a time of persecution. Jesus not only promised prison and persecution, He also promised:

C. Perishing For Some.

“Be faithful until death.” Alford’s Greek New Testament renders it, “even unto death.” Not “up to the point of death” and then stop being faithful. But, “be faithful even to death.”

Some of the believers in Smyrna were faithful “even to death” – for history records that their Pastor was burned at the stake. As I said earlier, annually every Roman citizen had to burn a pinch of incense to the Emperor and say, Caesar is lord.” But Christians who were true to the Lord Jesus Christ could not do that. That led to one of the most famous martyrdoms in history – the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna.

History records that it was a festival day and the crowds were in a highly excitable state. The cry went up to seize Polycarp. He was caught and brought to the public square where he was given the option to burn a pinch of incense to the Emperor and say, Caesar is lord” or be burned at the stake. The date was Saturday, Feb. 22 in the year A.D.155. (William Barclay, p.76, The Revelation, Vol.1).

Polycarp’s immortal answer was this: “Eighty and six years I have served the Lord Christ, and He has never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” He was tied to a stake and “the Jews, even though they were breaking the Sabbath law, were foremost in bringing wood for the fire” (Barclay), Polycarp was burned to death.”He was faithful even to death!

As the anti-God and anti-Christian forces about us increase and secular pressures intensify, we may be facing open persecution for our faith. If it ever comes to that, will we have the quality of faith that will “be faithful unto death”?

Remember, Paul wrote to Timothy, “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” What kind of persecution, to what degree and for how long we do not know. But we have the magnificent example of saints like Polycarp to inspire us to loyalty to Christ Jesus.

Jesus promised the believers in Smyrna prison, persecution, perishing and

D. Promotion For All.

There is a two-fold promise: “I will give you the crown of life.” (v.10) and “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” (v.11)

First, what is the second death? Rev 20:14 says: “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.” If you are born only once, you will die twice; if you are born twice, you will die only once, and maybe not then if Jesus comes first! If one’s destiny is not Hell, what then is it but Heaven?! Loyalty to Christ may bring death on earth, but it brings life in heaven. What a promotion!

Second, what is “the crown of life”? Every one of Jesus’ letters ends with an appropriate reward. To the overcomers in Ephesus in 2:7, Jesus promised the “tree of life.” To Smyrna believers He promised “the crown of life”.

In Greek there are two words for crown: “diadema”, which means a Royal Crown like the King wears and “stephanos”, the victor’s crown of joy. It is not the Royal Crown which is being offered to the Christian; it is the “stephanos”, the victors crown, the overcomer’s crown.

Smyrna was famous for its stadium and the events held there. It had the largest stadium in Asia Minor so the Smyrna church would not have found it difficult to imagine the Christian life as a race to be run, with the victors being crowned.

Standing at the harbor of Smyrna and looking inland you would see a hill – the hill Pagos, it was called. And the top of this hill was covered with heathen temples – great buildings that curved around that hilltop, creating what looked like a crown. In fact that hilltop was called “The Crown Of Smyrna.” Is that why Jesus alluded to “the crown of life”? Furthermore, the coins of Smyrna featured the portraits of notable persons in its history – and each one was wearing a crown!

The poverty-stricken Christians in Smyrna would never have an earthly crown; they would never have their likeness on the coins of the city with a crown on their heads – but Jesus promised them a promotion to heaven and a crown of life that fades not away!

The “crown of life” is not a payment – it is a reward! Jesus Christ will be in no one’s debt and loyalty to Him brings its own reward. What an encouragement this was to those downtrodden but faithful believers and to faithful believers today!

Smyrna was the site of suffering saints. Although bitterly persecuted, the church was precious in the sight of the Lord. This band of believers did not wear the badge of world approval, but were noted for their loyalty to Christ, obedience to the gospel and steadfastness in the face of death. May that be our testimony in life and legacy in death, knowing that our future is as bright as the promises of God!

“Faith of our fathers! Living still
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword:
O how our hearts beat high with joy
When e’er we hear that glorious word!
Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death!”

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