

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

JESUS LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA

Read Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction

Smyrna was a large, beautiful, and proud city and now, in modern day Turkey called “Izmir”. It was a centre of learning and culture and was proud of its standing as a city. “Smyrna was an outstandingly beautiful city. It claimed to be the ‘Glory of Asia.’” This was a rich city. It had especially rich trade in wines. Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a city of wealth and commercial greatness.

We also know from history that it was a city deeply committed to idolatry and the worship of the Roman Emperor. On one famous street in Smyrna, called the “Golden Street,” stood magnificent temples to Cybele, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, and a great temple to Zeus – but the worship of those pagan gods was dying out. The real focus was on the worship of the Roman Emperor.

Introduction of Jesus

‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life’ (v8b)

The First and the Last: Jesus chose this title from His initial appearance to John (Revelation 1:11, 1:17) to speak of His divine and eternal character. The First and the Last are titles that belong only to the Lord, Yahweh, according to Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, and 48:12.

Who was dead and came to life: Jesus chose this title from His initial appearance to John (Revelation 1:18) to remind the Christians in Smyrna that they served the risen Lord, victorious over death! Death could not hold Jesus, and it cannot hold His people.

Why would Jesus introduce Himself to this church in this manner? The remainder of Jesus’ words to this about to be persecuted church will reveal why. We must know that the risen Christ is one who has experienced the worst that the enemy could do to Him. No matter then what might happen to the Christians at Smyrna or to us, our Saviour has gone through the worst the enemy can bring. As such, He is one who feels for us in our suffering with special love and compassion and is ever present to come to our aid and comfort.

Meditate on these verses:

“Since all his “children” have flesh and blood, so Jesus became human to fully identify with us. He did this, so that he could experience death and annihilate the effects of the intimidating accuser who holds against us the power of death. By embracing death Jesus sets free those who live their entire lives in bondage to the tormenting dread of death. For it is clear that he didn’t do this for the angels, but for all the sons and daughters of Abraham. This is why he had to be a man and take hold of our humanity in every way. He made us his brothers and sisters and became our merciful and faithful King-Priest before God; as the One who removed our sins to make us one with him. He suffered and endured every test and temptation, so that he can help us every time we pass through the ordeals of life.” (Hebrews 2:14-18 TPT)

“For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize and understand our weaknesses and temptations, but One who has been tempted [knowing exactly how it feels to be human] in every respect as we are, yet without [committing any] sin.” (Hebrews 4:15 AMP)

The risen Christ has conquered the worst that the enemy can do. He triumphed over pain, the cross, the devil, sin, and death. He defeated all the enemies, and He offers victory and the conqueror’s crown.

But this calls for our loyalty and commitment to Him, not simply for rewards, but because of what we have in Him and love Him.

The Condition of the Church

“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.” (v9)

Jesus knew the works of the church in Ephesus as we studied in our last lesson. In Smyrna, Jesus also knew their works, tribulation, and poverty. He knows these hardships both in the sense that He saw what happened to them, and in the sense that He knew their hardships by His personal experience. We see Jesus identifying with the persecuted Christians in the time of Paul’s conversation:

“As he travelled, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him [displaying the glory and majesty of Christ]; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice [from heaven] saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting and oppressing Me?” And Saul said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He answered, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:3-5)

According to history, Smyrna was a prosperous city. Yet the Christians there were poor. “The word used for ‘poverty’ is the word for abject poverty. They were not just poor.” The Christians of Smyrna knew poverty because they were robbed and fired from jobs in persecution for the gospel. This kind of economic persecution was one important reason why Christians were poor in Smyrna. Even today, this is a common form of persecution against Christians.

Jesus did not just mention their poverty but went deeper. He was so faithful to know and observe their (our) lives and needs, first assures them He knows and cares for their condition and the great suffering on His behalf, and then commends them for their spiritual wealth amid their physical poverty and suffering, much of which was brought about by the religious Jews of Smyrna. So, while poor, they were rich.

- They were rich positionally in Christ (Eph. 1:3) which, of course, was by grace.
- They were also rich in that God had counted them worthy to suffer for Him (1 Pet. 3:14-17; 1:6; 4:13-14).
- Finally, it appears they were rich in their spiritual lives because they were living close to God by faith.

You can conclude that they were earthly (physically) poor and poor in the sight of men, but they were rich towards God. Jesus acknowledges their wealth. This is worth thinking about...

I know the blasphemy: Jesus knew the abuse these Christians endured at the hands of “religious” men, those who say they are Jews and are not. These were the religious Jews who claimed to be the seed of Abraham. They were, but only physically. Spiritually they were of Satan and under his power and control (John 8:44).

Jesus’ Command to this Church

“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.” (v10)

Do not fear: Literally, this is better translated “stop being afraid.” The Christians in Smyrna suffered under persecution, and they were afraid. Sometimes we think that Christians who endure persecution are almost super-human, and we sometimes don’t appreciate the depths of fear they struggle with.

There were things which they were about to suffer, and Jesus wanted them ready to stand against those things.

According to Jesus, the persecution about to come against the Christians of Smyrna was from the devil. At the same time, it was measured and limited by God. Surely, the devil wanted to imprison them for a longer time, but God limited the tribulation to ten days.

What the 10 days mean is subject to debate but for the purposes of this study, we will take it literally and conclude that it will be a short time of imprisonment and subsequent, death.

That you may be tested: If this attack came from the devil, then why couldn't these Christians in Smyrna just rebuke Satan, and stop the attack? Because God had a purpose in their suffering, and so He allowed it. In all ages, the blood of the martyrs has been seed for the church.

We will sometimes go through testing for our faith. We may not have the same opportunity to suffer for Jesus that the Christians in Smyrna had, but we can have their same heart. We may never be in a place to die a martyr's death, but we can all live a martyr's life. Sadly, many Christians avoid persecution of any kind by conforming so much to the world that they are no longer distinctively Christians. This wasn't the case with the Christians in Smyrna. They were tested and they passed the test.

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life: What Jesus said to this church is important, but what He didn't say is also important. Jesus didn't have a single word of rebuke or correction for the Christians in Smyrna. All He had was the promise of a crown – and the encouragement to be faithful until death, which is literally “become faithful until death.”

There are two different words for crown in the ancient Greek language. One described the kind of crown a king would wear - a crown of royalty. The other kind of crown – the “stephanos”, used here – is given as a trophy to a winning athlete. Jesus looks at the Christians of Smyrna and says to them: “You are My winners. You deserve a trophy.” As believers in Jesus Christ, we note that victory in this present life is closely associated with occupation and orientation to the weightier things of eternity and the glories which shall follow (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Here is one of those things which should distinguish believers from unbelievers. Believers are to be sojourners who live with a view to eternity, but unbelievers can spend their lives in pursuit of temporal and earthly things.

Jesus' Conclusion

“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.” (v11)

Though the Spirit has something to say to us through every one of the churches, this letter to the Christians in Smyrna applies to all modern, western Christians. To this point, we simply don't face the kind of persecution the Christians in Smyrna experienced but we faced persecution (even economic) in our daily lives. How are we standing in the face of these persecutions? Can we receive the encouragement Jesus gave to this church in Smyrna – to go through it even to the point of death?

There is a promise for overcomers. This promise is for those who overcome the threat of persecution, and the presence of persecution. We might say that we overcome by our close association with Jesus, who is the ultimate overcomer. As Jesus said, In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:33) but you must overcome with Jesus' help.

Those who overcome in Jesus will never be hurt by the second death. The second death is hell, the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14 and 21:8). Though Satan threatened and attacked their life, Jesus promises His overcomers that death is conquered for them.

It begs the question: what happens to those who do not overcome? To those who compromised? To those who did not receive Jesus' encouragement here?

The Smyrnan Christians are challenged to face possible martyrdom with courage and fidelity to God. Their reward for doing so will be a crown of life and they will avoid the second death.