

Letters from Jesus: Smyrna!

Revelation 2:8-11

An old preacher was dying. He sent a message to his banker and his lawyer, both church members, to come to his home.

When they arrived, they were ushered up to his bedroom. As they entered the room, the preacher held out his hands and motioned for them to sit on each side of the bed. The preacher grasped their hands, sighed contentedly, smiled, and stared at the ceiling.

For a time, no one said anything. Both the banker and lawyer were touched and flattered that the preacher would ask them to be with him during his final moments. They were also puzzled; the preacher had never given them any indication that he particularly liked either of them. They both remembered his many long, uncomfortable sermons about greed and covetous behavior that made them squirm in their seats.

Finally, the banker said, "Preacher, why did you ask us to come?"

The old preacher mustered up his strength and then said weakly, "I want to die just like Jesus did. between two thieves."

I became a Christian when I was 15 years old while living in Windom Minnesota. Windom had a very small Christian gift shop which did sell books and it was there that I picked up the first two Christian books that I would ever read.

The first was "Tortured for Christ" written by Richard Wurmbrand, the founder of The Voice of the Martyrs.

The second was "Tortured for his Faith" by Haralan Popov. He was a pastor in Bulgaria who spent 13 years in a communist prison for preaching the gospel.

These men paid a price for living out their faith and since reading their books I have always wondered what I would do if faced with this type of persecution. Would I be worthy enough to suffer torture for my faith. Would my faith be strong enough to endure.

Today we will look at the second of the seven letters of Revelation. The letter to the church in Smyrna.

I. The Correspondent, Church, & City

Revelation 2:8, “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”

All we know about the church in Smyrna is what is written here in the letter to the church of Smyrna.

Smyrna was a city that loved Rome and Roman culture. It was known for its participation in emperor worship.

It was a beautiful city, called the most beautiful city in Asia. It was built around a harbor and was a center for science and medicine in the first century.

Today the Turkish city of Izmir stands in its place.

As was the custom of the time, the author of the letter would identify themselves in the opening lines of the letter. Here Jesus identifies Himself first as the first and the last. This was a common Old Testament title for God, so here Jesus is calling Himself God.

He goes on to identify Himself as the one “who died and came to life again.”

How can the ever-living God die?

1 Peter 3:18, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.”

Jesus, in dying came to life.

Hebrews 2:14, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—”

When Jesus broke the power of death He gained life, not only for Himself, but for all of us.

II. The Commendation

Revelation 2:9, “I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

This word, affliction, can be translated tribulation or persecution. It literally means pressure. The church in Smyrna was literally under pressure.

This pressure came from the inhabitants of Smyrna who we already noted that they joyously participated in emperor worship and other pagan rituals. Since the church refused to participate it separated them from the community.

The slander which was spoken about them came from the Jews in the community, but here Jesus recognizes them not as true believers but as being apart of a synagogue of Satan. There was no difference between these Jews and the pagan worshipers of Smyrna.

Finally, Jesus acknowledges their poverty. The word He uses here doesn't simply mean poor, but more the type of poverty which requires begging to simply meet their basic needs for survival. The believers in Smyrna were destitute, possibly even slaves.

But Jesus raises a contrast here. In their poverty, they were rich. What they lacked in money they overflowed in salvation, holiness, grace, peace and fellowship. They knew the comforter!

How often do we simply focus on material wealth as we strive through life and neglect spiritual wealth. This is what the church in Smyrna had!

I told you that each of these 7 letters have the same structure. Now we come to the next section:

III. The Concern

There is none in this letter. Jesus had no concerns to write about the faith of the church in Smyrna. One commentator writes this:

“Throughout its history, the seemingly paradoxical truth has been that the more the church has been persecuted, the greater has been its purity and strength.”

Just like gold is purified in the fire, so are we. The cleansing fire of persecution has been used by God throughout history to strengthen the church. How would we do under such fire? Do we need this fire?

James 1:2-4, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its

work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

The author of Hebrews reminds his readers that even though we may suffer persecution we have not yet suffered like Jesus suffered.

Hebrews 12:3-4, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. 4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”

We have been told to expect persecution. This is how we identify with Jesus in His suffering. We are actually told that it is a privilege to be able to suffer for His namesake.

The church in Smyrna understood this. They knew the cost of being a follower of Jesus. It was too high to fake it. If you identified with Jesus in Smyrna you paid the price for it so there was no advantage to fake it.

2 Timothy 3:12, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,”

Do you want to live a godly life? Are you willing to pay the price for living a godly life?

It will only get worse in America. Today you may be simply called names for your beliefs. Even in England you can now go to jail for speaking Biblical truth...just like you can in Canada.

Are you ready to pay that price? Are you willing to pay that price? Even Peter broke under that pressure on the day of the cross. He knew the pain of failure; it didn't happen again for Peter.

When you come face to face with persecution will you stand strong? The church in Smyrna did. Jesus had no concern with them. Does He have a concern with The Log Church?

IV. The Command

Revelation 2:10a, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”

The church is going to be tested. Satan will make them suffer. Jesus told them it is coming! This test is much like the test that Job endured. He didn't know

why he was made to suffer, but he suffered. God allowed Satan to test Job and Job won! JOB WON!!! Which means Satan failed...again! Praise God!

The test was coming for some in the church of Smyrna, but they knew they were not alone. They knew that they would be in prison with Jesus.

Catch this:

2 Corinthians 12:9-10, "But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul's words here are powerful. Paul knew what suffering was. He endured prison, shipwreck, beatings. He was refined by persecutions fire.

He delighted in his weakness. He delighted in the insults. He delighted in the hardships. He delighted in the persecution! When you can do that, you already have the victory.

V. The Counsel

Revelation 2:10b-11, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death."

Do you want the victor's crown? Every race I ever ran I stepped up to the starting line expecting that I would win...well, up until I was 50...then not so much.

Let me tell you this truth, this race we are asked to run is fixed. You can win it, because it's rigged. Jesus already won it for you, so all you have to do is run what He has set before you and you will win it. And when you win, He has the victor's crown waiting for you.

And when you win you bypass go, you skip past jail, the second death and you go straight to paradise.

Notice this promise in:

1 Peter 5:10, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

Does it get any better than that? This verse comes 3 verses after one of my favorite verses in the Bible.

1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

This is the beauty of suffering...He is there with us. He is there to carry the weight and present us with the crown. Are you ready to suffer?