

Daily Bible Study

“Seven Letters ~ Smyrna”

Revelation 2:8-11

February 23 – March 1, 2014

MONDAY – Continuing our study of the letters to the seven churches of Revelation we move from the loveless church of Ephesus to the persecuted church in Smyrna. Smyrna was a large, wealthy city 35-40 miles north of Ephesus. Like Ephesus, it was a seaport. In contrast, Ephesus is today a deserted ruin and Smyrna is still a large seaport with a population of about 4 million. Earlier Jesus described Himself as “...*the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.*” He is the eternal One (**1:8, 17, 21:6, 22:13**) who suffered death at the hands of His persecutors and then was resurrected from the grave (**1:5**). The Christians at Smyrna were very much like Jesus in that they too were experiencing persecution. The name Smyrna means “myrrh,” which was an ordinary perfume, an anointing oil used in the tabernacle, and for embalming dead bodies (**Exodus 30:23, Psalm 45:8, Song of Solomon 3:6, Matthew 2:11, Mark 15:23, John 19:39**). While the Christians of the church at Smyrna were experiencing bitter suffering, their faithful testimony was like myrrh or sweet perfume to God. Read: **Revelation 2:8-11**:⁸*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.”*

Suggestion for Prayer: God, teach me this week from Sacred Scripture that even in suffering, You are with Your people and they will always rise victorious because of Your power.

TUESDAY – **Revelation 2:8**:⁸*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:’* A date for the founding of the Smyrna church cannot be firmly established. We know devout Jews from the province of Asia were at the Pentecost feast in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit was poured out (**Acts 2:9**), and some may have come from Smyrna, taking the gospel back with them. Another possibility is that when Paul came to Ephesus in the early fifties, he or his associates may have planted the church at Smyrna. We get the majority of our information on the early church of Smyrna from letters written by Ignatius to the church at Smyrna and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. He wrote

them in Troas a few days after leaving Smyrna, on his way from Antioch to Rome. He was brought to Rome as a martyr in 110. We know that politically the city sided with the Romans and became their faithful ally. Already in 195 B.C. Smyrna built a temple for Dea Roma, the goddess of Rome and in A.D. 26 it dedicated a temple to Emperor Tiberius and boasted to be first in emperor worship. Obviously this boast made the Roman administrators happy and the worship of the emperor arose and grew. This beautiful city was filled with wonderful buildings, had temples to Zeus and Cybele, and had an amazing layout of its streets and the city is known as “the crown” because the city’s buildings have a symmetrical appearance likened to a crown. Natural beauty was also a part of Smyrna and the city had many trees and they produced a brown, reddish, yellowish aromatic resin/gum called myrrh. In our text we see that Jesus commands John to write a letter to *the angel* of the Smyrna church and identifies himself as “*the First and the Last*”. God uses this phrase in Scripture to identify Himself when addressing His people; “*This is what the LORD says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God*” (**Isaiah 44:6, 48:12**). With this expression Jesus defines His divinity and equality in power and authority to that of God the Father. Jesus continues and adds the clause “*who was dead, and came to life*”. He is the one who died on Golgotha’s cross, conquered death, and is alive. Throughout the Book of the Revelation, the contrast between God and Satan and Christ and the Antichrist is detailed. In one section, the Antichrist appears as the beast coming up out of the sea, having a fatal wound and yet he lived (**13:3, 12, 14**). This and several other descriptions of the Antichrist reveal his sinful pride; here seen through his imitation of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The difference between them however is that Jesus did conquer death, has the keys of Death and Hades, and as the ever living one gives life to his people. The beast will be thrown alive with the false prophet into the lake of fire burning with brimstone (**13:14; 19:20**).

Suggestion for Prayer: Thank You Jesus for conquering sin, death & hell for Your people.

WEDNESDAY – **Revelation 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.”* The persecution at Smyrna stands out because the great enemy was the local community of Jews. One writer states, “These were God’s people racially, but not really” (**Romans 2:28**). They *blasphemed* (slandered – Greek: to speak against someone to harm or injure their reputation) the early Christians, called themselves Jews but really belonged to *the synagogue of Satan*, and aided the persecution of Jesus followers (**Vs.10**). They were in fact blaspheming God as they persecuted His church under the pretense of doing Him service (**John 16:2**). The members of the Smyrna church were in *poverty* but the Jews were wealthy. According to an inscription from the second century, Jews at one time donated the sum of ten thousand denarii for a project to beautify the city of Smyrna. Perhaps it was economic pressure from these Jews that brought the church to poverty and the

slandorous accusations by them that led to imprisonment and death. The enemies of God's people were really *a synagogue of Satan* and "Satan" means "adversary, one who opposes". This is precisely what God's people both in Smyrna and Salamanca face as they attempt to follow Jesus; opposition from the enemy. In spite of that opposition, we must remember those words from Jesus in our text, (*but you are rich*). These believers most likely experienced the confiscation of their earthly belongings, for the word *poverty* means "destitution, a state of having insufficient possessions" and refers to the abject poverty of a beggar. Paul uses this term in Corinthians when he says that Jesus, "*though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich*" (**2 Corinthians 8:2, 9**). Jesus tells His people they are spiritually rich. This does not mean we should invite persecution and hardships in order to become rich in spiritual possessions but it does teach us that Jesus wants us to be faithful to Him and His word even when it costs us and we go through hardship and abuse, for then we will truly be blessed spiritually (**Matthew 5:11–12, James 2:5**).

Suggestion for Prayer: Father, thank You for the reminder that in Jesus I am truly rich. Thank You Jesus for facing poverty & giving up everything in perfect submission & obedience. Also for facing & overcoming my spiritual bankruptcy by paying my debt with Your perfection.

THURSDAY – Revelation 2:10: 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 here says, "*Do not fear*" as He also said in **1:17**. He is addressing individual believers expanding the thought saying to "*not fear any of those things.*" He is in full control of every situation and knows what lies ahead of His people. He reveals they are about to enter a period of suffering. The Christians in Smyrna and everywhere must be fully aware that they are fighting a spiritual war in which they confront the devil (*Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison*). The devil will incite the authorities so that some of the people will be imprisoned with the possibility of being put to death (*Be faithful until death*). Jesus says that this threat to their lives is a *test* their faith in Him. The phrase "*you will have tribulation ten days*" has caused lots of questions through the years; most unnecessary. Biblically, the number ten conveys the meaning of fullness. For example; 10 Commandments, 10 plagues of Egypt, 10% tithe, 10 Kingdoms (Antichrist's world power is comprised in the ten kingdoms, symbolized by the ten toes on the feet of the image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (**Daniel 2:41**), and by the ten horns of the fourth beast of Daniel's vision (**Daniel 7:7,20,24, Revelation 12:3, 13:1, 17:3,7,12**), etc... In Revelation and here specifically it is a symbolical number to express the completeness of the period of suffering which may be long or short but it will be full and complete for its termination is sure. Jesus calls His people to be *faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life*. People are often faithful to themselves, country, causes, groups, co-workers and so on but here Jesus calls us to be faithful first to Him. Jesus is called "*the faithful one*" (**1:5, 3:14, 19:11**) as is Antipas, the martyr in Pergamum (**2:13**).

Now the saints in Smyrna, you and I are asked to pay the sacrifice to be faithful to death. As we mentioned earlier, the city was known as "the crown" because the buildings had a symmetrical appearance likened to a crown. Because of this, commentators see a connection between the crown of the city and the crown promised to the faithful followers of Christ. But the words of Jesus are "*the crown of life*," which make them different and meaningful. The phrase occurs also in **James 1:12**. It speaks to the highest joy, gladness and of the eternal glory and immortality of God's people which will be enjoyed forever. This opposition did in fact come upon these people and one example is the record in connection with the martyrdom of Polycarp, who on February 23, 155, was killed for his refusal to deny the name of Jesus. He had been the bishop of Smyrna for many years. As an elderly man he was given the choice of cursing Jesus' name and living or confessing His name and dying. The words of this faithful Saint of God have been passed down through the centuries: "Eighty-six years have I served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" After hearing this, the authorities sentenced him to die at the stake. The record indicates the Jews were foremost in gathering the wood for the fire. Ironically and bearing out the words of Jesus concerning the hypocrisy of these "false Jews", even though it was the Sabbath, they deliberately carried burdens of wood transgressing the law.

Suggestion for Prayer: Father, help me to be faithful to You and regardless of what I may go through in life, keep my eyes on You and love and trust you more than anything else.

FRIDAY – Revelation 2:11: 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.*" We find this first sentence repeated in the close of the letters to the churches stressing the work of the Holy Spirit in conveying Christ's message to *the churches*. The letter is not merely intended to teach the congregation at Smyrna but to all *the churches*; this message is a universal one for all of God's people. The verb *to overcome* appears here in a promise. The overcomer is given the promise that they *shall not be hurt by the second death*. The first death pertains to the physical, the second death to the spiritual, being cut off forever from God (**20:6, 14, 21:8**). Saints may suffer physical death at the hand of persecutors, but they will never be separated from God. By contrast, unbelievers will be cast by the Lord and away from Him into the lake of fire (**20:14** see also **Matthew 25:41**) and they will suffer eternal death. This means they will experience not annihilation but never-ending punishment. Nowhere does the New Testament promise freedom from suffering in this life; indeed, without the cross there will be no crown. The church may suffer the death of the physical body but she will not suffer the death of the soul. Look beyond the here and now beloved. "*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us*" (**Romans 8:18**). The message is be *faithful* not fearful; God is in control and has you.

Suggestion for Prayer: Father, thank You that You are in control of all things and that You will save me from eternal death. Thanks also that You will restore my soul and body forever.