

## “To the Church in Smyrna”

### *Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 4*

*Texts: Revelation 2:8-11; Zechariah 3:1-9*

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In the fifteenth chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus tell his disciples, “*if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first . . . . If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.*” And now in his letter to the church in Smyrna, Jesus tells this struggling congregation that they will suffer great persecution, persecution even to the point of death. The one responsible for this persecution is Jesus Christ’s ancient foe, the devil, who conducts his campaign against the church in Smyrna through the agency of the local synagogue and the local government. In Revelation 2:8-11, we see, in part, the historical outworking of that about which Jesus was warning his disciples in John 15, the inevitability of the persecution of God’s people at the hands of Satan. But Jesus Christ is the Lord of his church and even when persecuted unto death, his people triumph.

As we continue our series on the Book of Revelation, we are in that section (chapters 2-3) in which Jesus Christ addresses seven letters to historical congregations scattered throughout western Asia Minor. When we dealt with the first of these letters last week—to the church in Ephesus—we saw that Jesus Christ is the Lord of his church and that he addresses a number of specific issues facing each of these particular congregations. While Jesus addresses the specific issues which these congregations face, he is also speaking to his church throughout the entire church age, which is the present period in redemptive history, the period between our Lord’s first advent and second coming, also known as the “last days” and the great tribulation. Indeed, Jesus pronounces his blessing upon churches which are faithful in the midst of their struggles, while he threatens curses upon churches who are not.

The letters to the seven churches are part of a larger vision which began in Revelation 1:12 which opens with John’s description of the resurrected Christ. In this vision, John describes seven golden lampstands which are symbolic of Christ’s presence with his church as well as the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of these congregations to serve as light to the unbelieving world which lives in darkness. Therefore, as we work our way through these letters to the churches, we must see them as part of a larger vision which begins with a description of Jesus Christ in all of his post-resurrection glory. It is Jesus who is the Almighty, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and Last, that one who was dead but is now alive forevermore. Jesus holds in his hand the keys of death and Hades. It is this Jesus who walks among his churches. He knows the exact circumstances that each one of these congregations is facing. He knows their troubles and the nature of the evil they must confront. And Jesus commends these churches for their faith and perseverance, but also confronts them with their sins.

In the first of these seven letters, Jesus commended the Ephesian congregation for faithfully persevering in the face of false teaching. Ephesus was a city dominated by the temple of Diana (Artemis), paganism and the occult. This church has faithfully persevered in the face of this opposition to the gospel by exposing all of those who claimed to be apostles but who were not. The Ephesian church is also commended for hating the teaching of the Nicolaitans, a group teaching that Christianity could be synthesized with paganism.

But Jesus also has a stern word of rebuke for the Ephesian congregation. They have lost their first love and as a result have fallen from their lofty heights. Jesus threatens this congregation with the removal of his lampstand from their midst, symbolic of his presence among them and of the Spirit’s empowering

of this congregation to be a light to those around them. The solution was for the Ephesians to go back to do those things they did at the beginning.

While the loss of our first love is often interpreted to mean the loss of a believer's love for Christ, this is not the case. Jesus commends this particular church for their faithfulness in sound doctrine. The common interpretation that somehow the pursuit of sound doctrine is an obstacle to love for Christ is simply false, as though the way to become more loving was to become less interested in the truth. But what, then, does it mean when Jesus warns this congregation about losing their first love? Well, no doubt, given all that this congregation had been through, the struggle against false doctrine produced a hostile and contentious climate in which believers lost their love for each other. The continual and necessary debate over sound doctrine, sadly, produced a climate in which believers within this congregation were now divided, suspicious of each another and judgmental. They no longer showed any signs of the brotherly love, which Jesus says, is the sure sign to unbelievers that we are Christ's people.

The solution, Jesus says, is for the Ephesian church to repent and to go back to doing those things which they did at the beginning. They were not to abandon the stress on sound doctrine. Rather, they are to do those things which we see throughout the opening chapters of the Book of Acts. They are to ensure that no one in this church went without the essentials of life. They are to care for widows and orphans. They are to share their burdens—material and spiritual—with each other. They are to gather for prayer and fellowship. They are to do those things which were the concrete signs of genuine love that believers feel for each other. Shallow displays of emotion and unity won't cut it. The presence of genuine works of mercy and charity keep things in their proper perspective—sound doctrine and love for the brethren go hand in hand. We love our brethren because Christ first loved us.

**A**s we will see, there are a number of things which all of these letters have in common and which we ought to keep in mind before working our way through them.<sup>1</sup>

Each of these letters is addressed to the angel of that particular congregation. Some have argued that this is a reference to the pastor of these congregations or to the messenger who delivered the letter. But as we saw last time, there are good reasons to believe that this is a reference to actual angels (messengers) who are assigned to each of these churches. Furthermore, in each of these letters Christ identifies himself by referring back to the description John had given of him in the opening of the vision (Revelation 1:12-20). This ties the resurrected Christ to each of his churches. In the letter to Ephesus, this reference to John's vision is a reference to Christ's authority. In the letter to the church in Smyrna, the reference is to Christ's power over the grave, something especially germane to a church facing persecution unto death.

Another element common to each of these letters is Christ's knowledge of the circumstances facing each congregation. Jesus says to these churches: "I know. . ." and then describes in exacting detail the precise struggle facing each church. Jesus knows the doctrinal zeal of the Ephesians. He knows that the Smyrnan Christians are spiritually rich. But Christ also exhorts several of these congregations to take specific actions to avoid the loss of his blessing and presence. The Ephesians must repent and do those things which they did at the beginning. The Smyrnans, on the other hand, are one of two churches not rebuked at all by Jesus. Instead, they are called to suffer for Christ's sake. In addition, Jesus also holds out a promise to each of these churches, promises which also refer back to John's description of the resurrected Christ which opens the vision. The Ephesians were promised that if they repented, they will

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<sup>1</sup> See the helpful chart in Poythress, *The Returning King*, 84.

eat from the tree of life. The Smyrnans are promised that they will be delivered from death. Finally, each of these letters ends with an exhortation from the Lord of his church, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.*” This exhortation not only applies to the congregation to which the letter is addressed, it applies to us as well when we hear our Lord’s word to his church.

**B**efore we turn to the details of our text, it might be helpful to know something about the city of Smyrna where this particular congregation was located.

The ancient city of Smyrna—now the city of Izmir—is a port city on the western coast of Asia Minor. Possessing a fine harbor, the Smyrna of John’s day was a thriving commercial center of about 250,000 people. The city had a long history of loyalty to Rome and as early as 195 B. C. built a temple dedicated to the goddess of Rome. In 26 A.D. the city built a temple in honor of Emperor Tiberius, and boasted of being the first city which promoted worship of the emperor. This is one of the first concrete steps taken on the slippery but inevitable road to full-blown emperor worship. The imperial cult—emperor worship—is the backdrop against which John will describe the beast, the supreme agent of Satan.<sup>2</sup>

Ancient writers describe Smyrna as among the most beautiful of cities because two of the local temples—the temple of Zeus and the temple dedicated to Cybele, a pagan goddess—gave the cities’ skyline the appearance of a crown, hence the reference in ancient writings to “the crown of Smyrna.” The city was also well-known for groves of trees whose bark produced an aromatic gum known as myrrh, one of the precious spices brought to Jesus by the astrologers from the east and which was the basic element used for our Lord’s embalming and burial.<sup>3</sup>

Since there were citizens of Smyrna in the audience during Peter’s Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, it is possible that a church existed here from the beginning of the church age, although some of the church fathers suggest the church here was founded much later. There was also a very large Jewish population in the area which was openly hostile toward the struggling church. Coexisting with emperor worship, the members of the local synagogue, apparently, made every effort to make sure local authorities did not regard Christianity as a form of Judaism, and therefore, not a legally sanctioned religion. Instead, these Jews openly encouraged the Roman government to crack down on them. In AD 155, Polycarp, who had been the bishop of the church there for many years was arrested and then killed for refusing to deny his Lord. The famous church historian Eusebius reports Polycarp as saying to his inquisitor: “Eighty-six years have I served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” For uttering these words, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna was burned at the stake.<sup>4</sup>

**L**et us now turn to our text, Revelation 2:8-11 and our Lord’s letter to the church in Smyrna. In this letter, Jesus warns his church about the persecution they will face at the hands of Satan. But even though this church is called to suffer, it is also called to triumph.

It is Jesus Christ who commands John to write this letter “*to the angel of the church.*” Indeed, our Lord’s divine authority to speak to his people is borne out by the following assertion: “*These are the words of*

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<sup>2</sup> Kistemaker, Revelation, 121-122.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion in Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, 55-77.

<sup>4</sup> Kistemaker, Revelation, 121-122.

*him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.*” When Jesus speaks of himself as the First and the Last, there are powerful echoes from the prophecy of Isaiah when YHWH addresses Israel. In Isaiah 44:6, YHWH declares in almost identical words to those we find here: *“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.”* Given the similarity between these two texts, it is clear that Jesus’s authority to address the church in Smyrna is identical to that of YHWH’s authority to address Israel. The implication is clear. Jesus’ authority over his church is the same as God’s authority because it is God’s authority.

Notice too, that Jesus speaks of himself as the one who died and came to life again. It was Jesus who died on the cross for the sins of his people and who was raised to life for our justification, and who by virtue of his humiliation, has now been exalted to the status of King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In Revelation 1:18, John has already quoted the Risen Jesus as declaring of himself: *“I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”* To the church in Smyrna, Jesus reaffirms this glorious promise which is especially important in the context of Satanically inspired persecution facing Christians there, the constant threat of imprisonment and death.

Throughout the Book of Revelation we will see Satan attempt to imitate the power of Christ in order to receive worship for himself. This blasphemous deception can be seen in a number of ways, such as in the false Trinity composed of Satan, the beast and the false prophet, who mimic the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> In the letter to Smyrna, Jesus speaks of himself as the *“living one, the one who holds the keys of death and Hades.”* This means that Jesus alone is the Lord of life and of death. But this is a claim Satan will attempt to counterfeit. In Revelation 13, we find this description of the beast, who is the supreme agent of Satan: *“One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast.”*

While John’s assertion about the beast is best understood against the backdrop of the so-called Nero myth—which held that after his death in AD 68 Nero had not really died but he would return to wreak havoc on his enemies<sup>6</sup>—John sees the healing of a fatal wound as illustrating a pattern of Satanic deception which will continually re-emerge throughout the course of the present age. Satan will repeatedly attempt to imitate Christ’s power in order to receive worship for himself. This has always been Satan’s goal. In fact, John tells us in Revelation 13:13-14, that the dragon (Satan) *“exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived.”* It is Satan who enables his agents to imitate the power of Jesus Christ when the beast’s seemingly fatal wound is miraculously healed. But let us not forget that it is Jesus Christ who will hurl Satan, the beast and all his henchmen into the lake of fire on the day of judgment, while all those who are Christ’s will never taste the second death. Those Christians in Smyrna who face death at the hands of the devil need to know that Christ alone holds in his hands the keys of death and Hades. His promises are not the imitation, they are the reality.

As we find in each of these letters, Jesus tells the Smyrnans that he is fully aware of their struggles: *“I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are*

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<sup>5</sup> See Poythress, *The Returning King*, 16, ff.

<sup>6</sup> Poythress, *The Returning King*, 142.

*Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*” Because they refused to do as the Jews had done and make peace with emperor worship, Christians in this church were now suffering economically and were living in poverty. By refusing to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, Christians may have been prevented from entering the city’s central marketplace and conducting normal business. What is more, the charge of slander seems to indicate that the Jews were active in reporting Christians to the authorities, who would in-turn arrest them, ironically, for being “atheists,” that is, denying that the emperor was divine.

Satan is a liar from the beginning and lives to slander God’s people as seen, for example, in the Book of Job. In Zechariah 3—our Old Testament lesson—we read of Satan approaching the Angel of the LORD, who is Jesus Christ, to make false accusations against God’s people. After rebuking the Devil for his lies and slander, the LORD’s response is to order the removal of the filthy garments from his servant Joshua and to replace them with rich, clean ones. Just as he has done in defending his servant Joshua, Jesus will do for the suffering Smyrnans. As LORD of life, Jesus will ensure that his people will not taste the second death, and that he will clothe his own with the robes of his perfect righteousness.

But the temporal consequences of declaring that Jesus Christ is Lord in the face of the Satanically-inspired beast who controls the local government, were quite serious. These consequences are described here—the Smyrnans live in poverty—and again in Revelation 13:16-17, where we read that the Dragon “*forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.*” This mysterious mark of the beast—which we will take up in detail later on—refers to all those who worship the beast and pay him the homage he craves. The mark of the beast is the profession that someone other than Jesus Christ—in this case, the Roman emperor—is Lord.

Whenever Christians proclaim that Jesus Christ alone is Lord in places such as Smyrna where the beast rears his demonic head they will suffer material loss, hence the description of the poverty facing this congregation. But the reality is that since the Smyrnan Christians possess Christ through faith, they are rich. While the Jews slander them, the Roman authorities arrest them to put them to death, these poor Christians actually possess riches far greater than the temporal wealth of the local merchants. For God’s people will receive the crown of life and the rich and luxuriant robe of Christ’s righteousness.

When John speaks of the local synagogue as the synagogue of Satan, he speaking of those Jews who have made peace with paganism and who openly persecuted Christians—both messianic Jews and Gentile—by turning them over to those very same pagan authorities. Although these Jews may have been ethnic descendants of Abraham, they not only rejected the basis of the covenant, which is faith in Jesus Christ, God’s promised redeemer, they sought to co-exist with those who hated everything for which the Abrahamic covenant stood. These were not misguided Jews who rejected Jesus as their Messiah, they were secularized Jews who saw no problem with confessing allegiance to both YHWH and Caesar.<sup>7</sup>

In order to comfort these Christians facing such difficult persecution, Jesus gives them the following promise: “*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. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*” While the news that these Christians will suffer hardly sounds like a word of encouragement, Jesus not only tells the Smyrnans that their suffering will be of a limited duration—ten days—he also tells them that those who are faithful unto death will receive the crown of life.

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<sup>7</sup> Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, 67.

Again, there are several things here we should not overlook. As we have seen, throughout the Book of Revelation, numbers have symbolic meaning and are usually drawn directly from the Old Testament. In Daniel 1:12-14, we are told that Daniel and several others asked to endure a ten-day time of testing to demonstrate to the Babylonians that they had God's blessing. At the end of the ten days of persecution in Smyrna, it will be apparent to all of God's enemies that those who are Christ's receive vindication from God. We also know that the Roman prison system incarcerated people only for a short time before executing them, which possibly explains the connection John makes between the short imprisonment and the reward which follows, "the crown of life." This too must be seen against the backdrop of the ancient world, in which a triumphant athlete received the laurel wreath only after emerging from a contest victoriously.<sup>8</sup> Having endured the ten day trial, God's people will receive the crown of victory.

But there is no greater victory than to be victorious over death—which is why Satan attempts to imitate the power of Christ. In fact, in Revelation 20:4-5, the famous millennial passage where John speaks of Jesus Christ's thousand year reign over the earth, John sees the souls of certain individuals, who "*had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years . . . This is the first resurrection.*" Those Christians in Smyrna—or anywhere else for that matter—who faithfully endure the ten days of persecution and who are put to a martyr's death by the Beast, are rewarded when they come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. Again, the numbers John uses are significant. A thousand years is ten cubed (10 x 10 x 10), and indicates completion. Those who suffer for ten days, will live for a thousand years!

The promise of victory for those martyrs who lay down their lives because of their faith in Jesus Christ is an important one for persecuted churches like the one in Smyrna. Indeed, just when it looks like Satan wins when he secures the sentence of death for the saints, instead the saints receive the crown of life! And this promise of eternal life comes not from that one who imitates the power to give life, but from that one who "was dead, and is now alive for ever and ever and holds the keys of death and Hades in his hand." And this same risen Christ exhorts the church in Smyrna, "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*"

Therefore, the point of application for us drawn from Christ's letter to the Smyrnans is really a simple one. No matter what Satan can do to us—even if he forces us to live in poverty, even if he turns the government against us, even if causes other religions to slander us, even if he takes our lives—he cannot win.

Satan may take away our material goods, but in Jesus Christ we have all the riches of heaven.

Satan may turn the state against us, but Jesus Christ is our king and to him, the nations are but a drop in the bucket.

Satan may lie about us and slander us, but Jesus Christ rebukes him and strips off our filthy rags while clothing us with his perfect righteousness.

Satan may even take our lives, but if he does, we will come to life with Christ and reign with him for a thousand years.

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 74.

The application then is very simple. In Jesus Christ we are rich. In Jesus Christ we overcome. In Jesus Christ we will never face the second death. In Jesus Christ we have already received the crown of life. Therefore, “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches! Amen!