

To the Seven Churches in Asia

The Smyrna Letter

Revelation 2:8-11

Introduction

1. There are records of history, true stories, which affect us greatly when we hear about them. The tragedies, the suffering, the struggles tear at our hearts. But though these stories affect us in many ways, they feel distant, for we have yet to experience anything remotely similar.
 - a. These accounts are recorded with purpose – they promote compassion, they preserve remembrance, and they often mean to prevent repetition.
 - b. One thing they also do is prepare us for the same.
 - c. **This is what the Smyrna letter does for us.**
 2. Can any of us say that we have experienced what these brethren did? Yet many in our day have (though not in our land).
 3. We must know that we are not exempt from this tribulation which Christ speaks of in His letter to the church in Smyrna. We must approach the letter in humility, knowing we **“have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.” (Hebrews 12:4)** We must approach the letter with sobriety, knowing that we may be subjected to such in the future.
- I. Christ’s Portrait
- A. The First and the Last **(v. 8)**
 - a. Last appeared – **Revelation 1:17-18** – in context of comfort provided.
 - b. Description of supremacy, power, and ultimately deity – **“I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God.” (Isaiah 44:6)**
 - c. Smyrna refounded in 290 B.C. – recognizing the rising dominance of Rome, Smyrna aided them, and reaped great progress from doing so.
 - i. Claimed to be first, without rival – began to excel beyond the Roman centers of even Ephesus and Pergamum.
 1. “known as *the glory of Asia*” (Vincent’s Word Studies)
 - ii. 193 B.C. – built a temple to “the deity of Rome”
 - iii. 26 A.D. – was chosen out of 11 contending cities to erect a temple to Tiberius.
 1. Became “the seat of the sinister Caesar-cult which was to cause so much suffering in the church” (The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, 462).
 2. The emperor, Domitian, elevated this with decreed worship, with penalty for refusal.

- d. Where Rome and its emperor were deified, and Smyrna claimed first place among those loyal to her, Christ reorients them with the truth!
- B. He Who was Dead, and Came to Life **(v. 8)**
 - a. **Revelation 1:18** – He was killed, but conquered death and lives forever more – and has the keys – solution and authority.
 - b. **Revelation 2:10** – the call to willingness to die for Him was not unfounded but came from the weight of His own experience and victory.
- II. Christ's Praise
 - A. Silence that Speaks Volumes **(v. 9)**
 - a. Smyrna is 1 of 2 churches addressed by Christ without anything negative to say (Philadelphia).
 - i. However, though nothing negative is said, there is not much specified in regard to what is positive.
 - ii. **"but you are rich"** – the only directly positive fact noted by Christ – a parenthetical statement.
 - iii. Ephesus had a list of 7 things praised by the Lord – yet, where Christ protested their lacking love, Smyrna receives no criticism.
 - iv. **Here, the SILENCE of Christ speaks volumes – contextualized by His knowledge of their plight.**
 - b. **"I know your works"** – what works? Christ does not specify, but He knows them, and they are such that are seen clearly through great trial.
 - c. **Tribulation**
 - i. *Thlipsis* – "literally pressure, pressing together; figuratively in the NT, of suffering brought on by outward circumstances affliction, oppression, trouble" (ALGNT)
 - ii. Jesus forewarned the apostles – **John 16:33**
 - iii. Apostles then encouraged disciples – **Acts 14:22**
 - iv. Smyrna had experienced her fair share of tribulation, and would experience more, but Christ's silence (no protest) speaks volumes – **Mark 4:16-17** (Stony soil) – Smyrna had root in good soil, and tribulation did not cause it to wither.
 - d. **Poverty**
 - i. *ptōcheia* – "1. Beggary...2. in the N.T. poverty, the condition of one destitute of riches and abundance" (THAYER)
 - ii. Literal poverty contrasted with figurative wealth – **"but you are rich"**
 - iii. **Plundering of goods** – **Hebrews 10:34**

- iv. **Social antagonism** – faithfulness to Christ set those faithful to Rome against them, making it difficult to make a living.
 - 1. Paul’s irony – **1 Corinthians 4:8, 11, 13** – identifies the common view of the world toward Christians.

e. Blasphemy

- i. *blasphēmia* – “generally harmful, abusive speech against someone’s reputation” (ALGNT)
 - 1. Not limited to blasphemy against God.
 - 2. Jews that were slanderous of Christians.
 - ii. “Christians were accused of various types of criminal or antisocial behavior” (WBC, Aune)
 - 1. Jews that capitulated to Rome and her supporters in Smyrna lashed out against the Christian’s they hated with untrue accusations, pitting authorities against them.
 - 2. A history of this – **Luke 23:2, 14** (Jesus); **Acts 6:11, 13** (Stephen); **Acts 13:45; 14:2; 18:6** (Paul)
 - iii. **“those who say they are Jews and are not”** – **Romans 2:28-29; Philippians 3:2-3**
 - iv. **“but are a synagogue of Satan”** – **John 8:44** – they belong to Satan and his work.
 - 1. Contrast – **“the church (assembly) (of Christ/God) in Smyrna”/ “the synagogue (assembly) of Satan”**
- f. Christ speaking of His knowledge of their plight, and His silence concerning any specific praise tells us all we need to know – **1 Peter 5:12** – in their suffering they remain steadfast in God’s grace.
- i. **1 Peter 1:6** – necessary trials.
 - ii. **1 Peter 2:12-17** – spoken against as evildoers, specifically as a defectors from Rome, when their faith makes them good citizens.
 - iii. **1 Peter 5:8-9** – by persecution Satan is seeking to devour them.
 - iv. They follow their Lord – **1 Peter 2:21-25**
 - 1. Christ’s words to Smyrna are pregnant with meaning – **“I KNOW”** – **Revelation 2:9**
 - 2. They suffer – **“CHRIST ALSO SUFFERED” (v. 21)**
 - 3. They are poor – **“THOUGH HE WAS RICH...HE BECAME POOR” (2 Corinthians 8:9)**
 - 4. They are blasphemed (by Jews) – **“HE WAS REVILED” (v. 23)**

B. You Are Rich **(v. 9)**

- a. Tribulation – *thlipsis* – “being derived from *tribulum*, the threshing-roller of the Romans.” (Vincent’s Word Studies)
 - i. Pressure applied to grain or grapes to bring something positive or useful.
 - ii. **2 Corinthians 4:16-17 (“affliction” – *thlipsis*)** – the pressure of affliction is bringing about glory – the inner renewal will eventually come out, and the pressure of tribulation is part of what does it.
 - iii. **Tribulation (general) is manifesting in many ways, poverty (specific) is one – but the pressure produces and exposes the riches!**
- b. **“If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Peter 4:14)**
- c. **“Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom” (James 2:5).**
- d. **“as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.” (2 Corinthians 6:10)**
- e. They are **“rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).**
 - i. Like Paul, in prison requested of Timothy – **“Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments.” (2 Timothy 4:13 – “especially the parchments”** – durable material, important, scripture?)
- f. Because of Christ – **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)**
 - i. I know your poverty because I experienced it.
 - ii. I know your riches because I have given them.

III. Christ’s Prescription

A. Do Not Fear **(v. 10)**

- a. Again, it is Christ’s silence that speaks louder than even His words:
 - i. He does not direct them away from the fear of what they have GONE through, nor what they are GOING through.
 - ii. He does not encourage them by telling them the tribulation will soon cease.
- b. The Gospel Christ presents to the Smyrna church is vastly different than that presented by those claiming to be Christians in the world.
 - i. It is a gospel that says YOU WILL SUFFER, AND YOU WILL SUFFER STILL MORE – **“YOU ARE ABOUT TO SUFFER”**

1. **Tested** – their faith still needs proving! – **1 Peter 1:6-7** – we think we know when is enough, but only He does.
 2. **10 days** – expressing fullness, though with definite end.
 - ii. It is a gospel that says THERE IS NO REASON FOR FEAR, FOR I SUCCUMBED TO MY SUFFERING AND YET LIVE FOREVERMORE – **Revelation 1:18**
 - c. **(v. 8)** – He was dead but came to life – **1:18** – He has the keys to Hades and death.
 - i. **John 11:25-26** – the resurrection and the life.
 - ii. Death of persecutors – a death that will find more death
 - iii. Death of faithful – a death that will find life.
 - d. ***“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4)***
 - i. Preceded by **Psalm 22** – Messianic suffering followed by victory.
 - ii. Followed by **Psalm 24** – the Glorious King and His Kingdom.
- B. Be Faithful Unto Death (ESV) **(v. 10)**
- a. **Revelation 2:10** – not just a marker of time, but of extent.
 - b. Faithfulness, not only for the rest of your life, but especially even if it takes you to your premature death.
 - c. Faithful – to who? Christ! Why? His promise and His faithfulness!
 - i. It is the faithfulness of Christ that warrants our faithfulness.
 - ii. How can they be loyal to Christ unto the bitter end? BECAUSE HE WAS FIRST! AND HE WILL BE!
 - iii. **2 Timothy 2:11-13** – ***“He remains faithful”*** – so instead of failing in faith, be strengthened in faith!
 1. ***“For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.” (2 Corinthians 1:20)***
 - iv. **The Martyrdom of Polycarp (ca. 86-155 A.D.)** (a companion of John – in Smyrna) – ““Swear,” urged the Proconsul, “reproach Christ, and I will set you free.” “86 years have I have served him,” Polycarp declared, “and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”
(<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp>)

IV. Christ’s Promise

- A. I Will Give You the Crown of Life **(v. 10)**

- a. Smyrna boasted of preeminence among the cities as “the glory of Asia,” and loyal to Rome.
 - b. Smyrna was crowned with “a diadem of porticoes surrounding her hilltop” (The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, 464).
 - i. The appearance of a crown became a symbol of the city.
 - ii. Known as “the crown of Smyrna.”
 - c. These Christians were merely pilgrims – **1 Peter 2:11; Philippians 3:20** – their citizenship was in heaven.
 - d. They longed for the crown Christ promised:
 - i. **“the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).**
 - ii. **“an imperishable crown” (1 Corinthians 9:25).**
 - iii. **“the crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:8).**
 - iv. **“the crown of glory that does not fade away” (1 Peter 5:4).**
 - e. **“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” (James 1:12, NASB)**
- B. You Shall Not be Hurt by the Second Death **(v. 11)**
- a. Because He has the keys – **Revelation 1:18; 2:8**

Conclusion

1. The Smyrna letter speaks of conflict which we have yet to experience, but it must be ready with the understanding that such is not beneath us.
2. We can take our comforts for granted and even act as though they are our right. But Christ calls us to suffer for Him.
3. We, like Smyrna, must not only stand for truth and do what is right, but we must **“be faithful unto death!”**