

Revelation 2:8-11 A Perfect Church?

Introduction:

How would you like to be part of a church toward which Jesus had not even one negative thing to say? There is nothing to criticize, there is no need for repentance. If there is such a thing at all, this would truly be the perfect church. That's the kind of church we are looking at today.

Jesus has nothing negative to say about two of the churches in this group of seven. The church in Smyrna is one of them. (The other is Philadelphia.) Christ's assessment of their character and faith is totally positive. Their circumstances, however, are harsh. This is a suffering church – a church in the midst of persecution. A church which will be required to be faithful to death. Perhaps Jesus says nothing negative because they really need only encouragement. Their situation is very hard.

A Look at the Passage

2:8 Smyrna The name of the city relates to both “bitter” and “myrrh,” a thorny bush that is cut to bring out a bitter gum which dries into a very fragrant resin. It was then used in making perfumes. It was used in the anointing oil first prepared by Moses for the tabernacle and later temple. The Magi presented it to Christ as one of their gifts. Nicodemus used it to embalm the body of Jesus.

History: Settlement of the city dates back before 1000 B.C. It made a claim to be the birthplace of Homer, author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, giving it a huge place in Greek tradition. The city had very close ties with Rome and was the hub of a very active emperor cult. Not much is known about the church before this time, including when or how it was founded. Today it is called Izmir. With 3 million people it is the 3rd largest city in Turkey.

The First and the Last Christ begins by asserting His deity. He made the same point to John back in **1:17**.

Who was dead and came to life Robert L. Thomas translated this as “who came to be dead and lived.” The emphasis is on the temporariness of His death, but the permanence of His life. This point is especially relevant for the church in Smyrna, given the trials they are enduring.

2:9 Jesus uses three words to describe their situation:

Tribulation The word comes from a verb meaning to “crush, press, compress or squeeze,” and was used to speak of trouble and affliction.

Poverty – There were two words in Greek available to speak of poverty. The one type means the person has nothing extra; the other type means the person has nothing at all. This is the *nothing at all* variety. The poverty of this church was devastating and plainly visible.

(but you are rich) In parentheses, Jesus gives them the reality. They may not have much here on earth, but from Christ's point of view, the only one that really counts, they are the rich, wealthy, abounding in resources.

Blasphemy – or “slander.” We normally associate this word with speaking against God, but the basic meaning is simply verbal abuse or evil speaking. It is bearing false witnesses; wounding someone's reputation by evil reports. It can relate to slander or gossip. Most likely, the people of this **synagogue of Satan**, were speaking all kinds of false and wicked things against the church in Smyrna, ruining their reputation. Jesus knows that none of it is true.

Synagogue vs. church The book of Acts shows us how church grew out of the synagogue. If there was a synagogue in a city, this is where the first Christian preaching took place. Some of the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles believed, the crowds normally grew, adding more Gentiles into the mix. Eventually the Jews who did not put their faith in Jesus forced the Christians out, keeping the culture of the synagogue for themselves.

- Since theirs was an ancient monotheistic religion, the Romans gave the Jews the freedom to worship only their own God. This doesn't mean they liked the Jews very much. It only means they put up with them. They allowed them to observe their own customs wherever they lived, but seem to have found them a nuisance. They made a little compromise by saying they didn't have to honor the emperor with their worship if they prayed for the emperor in their own slightly quirky, imageless worship services.
- As long as the Christians were perceived a sect of Judaism, they had the same freedom the Jews did. Like Jews, they were odd but harmless. As more Gentiles joined the church this became harder to swallow. The Jews no longer recognized them as their own. The Romans didn't have a category for a non-Jewish sect that wouldn't worship the Roman gods. The result was increasing trouble.

2:10 Do not fear This is the foundation of Christ's instruction for this church. Things were already bad; now they were going to get worse. It would be essential that they not give in to fear.

The devil Christ's references to the synagogue of Satan and the devil throwing some of the Christians of Smyrna into prison reveals an important truth. Just as God works through His people here on earth, the devil has people deceived into doing his work as well. The deception can be nearly total.

John 16:2-3 *²They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. ³And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.*

Theodore Beza, the French Reformer, was once engaged in a discussion with the King of Navarre, an area on the border between France and Spain. The year was 1562, and a group of French Protestants were recently massacred. Beza commented,

“Sire, it belongs in truth to the church of God, in whose name I speak, to endure blows and not to inflict them. But it will also please your majesty to remember that she is an anvil that has worn out many hammers.”

Tested ... tribulation 10 days There are a few passages Scripture or certain facts of history that some say relate to this 10 days of testing for the church in Smyrna. Personally, I don't find anything super convincing. They are more like interesting connections rather than helpful insights or explanations.

One of these is the 10 days that Daniel and his friends persuaded the king's servant to allow them to eat a water and vegetable diet, rather than defile themselves with his the usual non-kosher fare. Like I said, interesting, but not exactly a help in interpreting this verse.

Another more symbolic meaning is suggested by the 10 Roman emperors who carried out the worst persecutions of the church. Again, interesting, but what did that really have to do with Smyrna? Nothing, it's carrying the message of this section of the book into a historical view, which, whatever its merits, doesn't help us know how the first readers understood it or help us to apply it now. Thus, we are left with 10 days of trouble. Maybe they were really about to be tested for 10 days?

Application: Whatever the meaning for the believers in Smyrna, we can at least see a lesson in it. The persecution or testing was temporary. When we are in the midst of our trials they really do seem endless. From Christ's perspective that is completely untrue. He knows how long they are going to last. We can trust that He has determined their end. Whatever trial you are going through, understand that.

And remember the words of James:

James 1:2-4 ²*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,* ³*knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.* ⁴*But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.*

James 5:10-11 ¹⁰*My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience.* ¹¹*Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.*

Faithful until death Here is the harsh truth. Some of the members of the church in Smyrna would die as a result of the persecution that was raised up against them. This was no ordinary trouble. They would have to give their lives for the sake of the Gospel.

True story: In May of 2012, Jaman Iseminger, pastor of Bethel Community Church in Southport, came in on a Saturday morning, May 19, to meet for a workday. A group from Bethel was planning to clean up the cemetery next door to the church. A woman walked into the building and shot him dead. The woman had a history of mental illness.

What's the point? There was a time when we would have found stories like these absolutely shocking. Let's face it, such stories will probably only become more frequent. And as the church is increasingly marginalized, people will view such murders as decreasingly horrible.

Crown of life Or, "the crown that is life." James used the same expression.

James 1:12 *Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*

Eternal life makes earthly trials and even those ending in death part of a process of secondary importance. As Jesus said,

Matthew 10:28 *And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.*

2:11 He who has an ear... This call to pay close attention is given in each of the letters. It indicates that each of the letters is not only for the church to which it was written, but is also meant for public consumption – it's a message that all of us need to hear.

Greek for "shall not" is the strongest available form in Greek.

Second death This term appears four times in the Bible and all of them are right here in Revelation. The other three appear later in the book. The second death is eternal punishment.

Revelation 20:6 *Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.*

Revelation 20:14 *Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*

Revelation 21:8 *But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*

The controversy of speaking about final judgment: The Bible speaks about the coming final judgment in very matter of fact terms. It declares heaven and hell as mere realities to be dealt with. Their root ideas appear in the OT, but were later developed in the NT. Heaven, hell and judgment were included in the preaching and teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

It is controversial to talk about a final judgment in our culture, especially hell. Heaven sometimes gets a pass. One of the objections is that such preaching is designed to appeal to lower motives such as reward and punishment to get us to consider God. They motivate by means of selfishness and fear. How awful. What a primitive way to motivate intelligent people.

I would like to challenge that question directly. Certainly they are not the highest forms of motivation. It would be wonderful if we could motivate everyone at all times by pure gratitude and love toward God. I believe that will actually characterize our motivation for service in the new heavens and the new earth. But here we are in our present environment and this kind of motivation is used all the time.

In what other areas do we allow for such motives?

- **Smoking.** Ever read those warnings on cigarette packs? They started very simple, but the trend is to make them more gruesome. Only the cigarette companies argue. Warnings now appear on cigars and smokeless tobacco as well.
- **Drinking and driving.** The police post signs. Punishments are severe. MADD carries out campaigns designed to shame people into right behavior.
- **Texting and cell phones while driving.** Just yesterday as I was preparing this I saw an ad which stated in a bold scary font, "It's not worth your life. Don't call or text while you drive. One text or call could wreck it all" OK, I see the point. Fair enough.
- **Insurance companies.** Mr. Mayhem is there to scare me – which is fear. Other companies tell me I can save money – a selfish reward if ever there was one.

In short, we put up with this all the time. We might even say it makes sense. If it's true in lesser areas, why not when eternity is on the line? Jesus is pointing out a situation in which there is much more at stake. Overcome and the second death shall not hurt you.

Take Away Points

1. **Do not fear** Fear is one of the enemy's greatest tools. If he cannot ultimately hurt us, he will weaken our resolve through fear.
2. **Be faithful unto death** Faithfulness is essential and faithfulness can be costly. When we make our commitment to Jesus, we make that commitment for life. We can be sure He is keeping His end of the bargain. Nothing less than faithfulness unto death is what Christ asks from us.
3. **Eternal life is real – and this is what Christ offers.** Jesus is not offering us greater comfort here on earth. He is not promising us an easy, challenge-free life. He is promising us an eternity in glory, even if our lives, like the lives of the church in Smyrna, are characterized by difficulty right now.
4. **The second death is also real – and this is what we are avoiding.** Overcome, be faithful and the second death will not harm you. You have nothing to fear in eternity if you are walking with Jesus right now.

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Polycarp was a young disciple of the Apostle John. Later in life he became the bishop of Smyrna. He would have known the book of Revelation, since it was written by his mentor in ministry. He would have known this letter to Smyrna. For all we know Polycarp may have seen himself as the messenger or angel to whom it was written. About 60 years or so after the church in Smyrna would have received this letter, when Polycarp was now an old man, he was put to death publicly by the Roman authorities.

Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, "Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ;" Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

Polycarp Confesses Himself a Christian. *And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar," But Polycarp said, "To thee I have thought it right to offer an account [of my faith]; for we are taught to give all due honour ... to the powers and authorities which are ordained of God.*

No Threats Have Any Effect on Polycarp. *The proconsul then said to him, "I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast thee, except thou repent." But he answered, "Call them then... " But again the proconsul said to him, "I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing thou despisest the wild beasts, if thou wilt not repent." But Polycarp said, "Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly."*

Polycarp Is Sentenced to Be Burned. *While he spoke these and many other like things, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was full of grace, so that not merely did it not fall as if troubled by the things said to him, but, on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished...*

In Conclusion:

How would you like to be part of a church toward which Jesus had not even one negative thing to say? There is nothing to criticize, there is no need for repentance. A church like that might have to be a church:

1. That is experiencing various troubles.
2. That is characterized by serious poverty, but possesses heavenly wealth.
3. That is unjustly slandered by people around it.
4. That is ready to endure both prison and life threatening persecution.
5. That will be faithful unto death, but will receive the crown of life from a Savior who also became dead and yet lives.