

TO THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

Revelation 2:8-11

Intro: Smyrna is the only city of the seven mentioned here in Revelation 2 and 3 which still exists. Its name today is Ismir. Probably many of you have had the privilege of visiting Ismir as Lucille and I had back in the early seventies. We stayed in a very nice hotel, but the first thing that greeted us as we entered the hotel was a large statute of the goddess Diana. What the spiritual state of the city was then and now, I cannot say, but we saw nothing to indicate that there was a strong work of the Lord in that place, or even a work of the Lord at all. But we were not there long enough to find out. As I think back over our trip in those days, I regret that the main purpose was to visit the ruins or sites of ancient places of interest rather than to see where the work of the Lord might exist today. It is good and necessary to understand history, but it is even more important to see what the Lord is doing throughout the world today. He is working, and we are often surprised to find those who believe in Christ in the most unexpected places. I heard the other day that 3% of the population of Iraq is Christian. That probably includes Roman Catholics, but undoubtedly there are those in Iraq who truly know the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So I wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that there are true believers in Christ in Ismir today, although I am sure that the majority of the people are Muslims.

There was a church there in the first century. We know that Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna, that he had been set apart for the work of the ministry by the Apostle John, and that he was later martyred in Rome. And so there seems to be strong evidence that he was "the angel [messenger, pastor] of the church in Smyrna" to whom this letter was addressed. But that does not affect the meaning of the Lord's letter to the church at Smyrna one way or the other except for the possibility that it may have been largely through Polycarp that the Lord had done the work which the Lord referred to in this letter. But there is no attempt to identify the leadership of the churches in any of these churches except for the major role that the Apostle John probably had in ministering to each of them, especially in his later years.

But now let us see what we do have.

In verse 8 we have the address of the letter – both to whom it was sent, and from Whom.

In verse 9 we see how very familiar the Lord was with His work in Smyrna. We come to those words which are found in every letter: “I know.”

In the first part of verse 10 we have *the Lord’s commandment* for the people in the church. This is followed by *the Lord’s prediction* of what was ahead for the church. And the verse concludes with *a promise for their faithfulness*.

In the last verse, 11, we have an exhortation to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches (an indication that John was writing for the Lord under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit). And then the letter closes with another promise.

One thing which ought to be of special interest to us in this letter is the fact that Satan (adversary), or the Devil (accuser, maligner, slanderer) as he is also called, is mentioned twice in this letter. He is mentioned again in 2:13; 2:24; and 3:9 in these letters. Satan is an adversary to God, to the people of God, and to the whole human race, as shown in Scripture.

But now let us look at the letter more in detail.

I. THE ADDRESS (Rev. 2:8).

Again, as with the letter to the church at Ephesus, this letter is addressed “to the angel of the church in Smyrna,” the pastor, the one whose responsibility it was to give to the church the Word of God, or as it is here, the words of the Lord Jesus. As I sought to emphasize with you last week, it was not anything that he had a choice about. It was his calling, and he understood that it was. The Apostle Paul’s words with respect to the Gospel, was, “Woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). His complete statement was:

16 For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!

At one period in his life, Jeremiah was ready to quit. But found that he couldn’t quit. And this is what he said:

9 Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more

in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay (Jer 20:9).

So the letter was addressed actually to the whole church. But who was it from? See the latter part of verse 8: “the First and the Last, which was dead, and is alive.” (See the latter part of Rev. 1:17 and the first part of verse 18.) He is from everlasting to everlasting, from eternity past, all through time, and unto eternity to come. He is the Creator and He is the Consummator. He became dead, but He was raised from the dead, and now He is “alive forevermore.” There was no God before Him, and there will be no gods after Him. And through it all He never changes. He is Jehovah. What an amazing amount of truth is bound up in these words! They had a special need for this reminder in Smyrna, but so do we! And that is one reason it is in our Bible today. Dwell on these words until they strengthen your weak faith.

The second point has to do with:

II. THE OMNISCIENCE OF GOD (Rev. 2:9).

Paul had to receive a letter from the Corinthian church before he really knew what was going on there, and so could write to help them. But the Lord needed no such letter from any of the churches of Asia. *He knew every detail about the work in each place, knew it better than the pastor did, knew it better than any of the people did.*

When our Lord was speaking to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount concerning prayer, He told them that there was no need for the “vain repetitions” which the heathen used to make their gods hear them because, He said, “your Father knoweth.” See Matt. 6:8. It is absolutely impossible for us to tell the Lord anything about anything or anybody, including ourselves, that He does not already know. He knows the future better than we know the past because He is sovereign over it all!

This is another glorious fact about God that we need to think about until we can never think about God without thinking about the perfect knowledge He has about everybody and everything! It will bring peace to our hearts to think, *my heavenly Father knows!*

What did the Lord know in this case?

He knew their “works.” This is not in all MSS, but it is in some, so we will deal with it because it is true. What is meant by works? Well, it means their service to the Lord, but it includes more than that. It means everything that they were doing, action by action. He knew not only that the people were serving Him, but He knew that they were living for Him!

But He also knew their tribulation. He knew their troubles, the opposition that they were facing. He never has promised His people an easy time on their way to heaven. In fact, He has promised us that we will have trouble if it is clear from our lives that we love Him, and that we love God. Evidently the believers in Smyrna were suffering persecution because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And, as was often the case, He knew that the persecutors had taken many of their possessions, had seen that they were fired from their jobs, and all because of their faith in Christ. This is a kind of a pattern which follows the Lord’s people when they really love the Lord and live for Him. This is one reason so many people hate President Bush. They hate him because of his faith. One Hollywood “celebrity” (and they always think that they know so much) said of our President, “We want him to lead us as an American, but not as a Christian.” She will remember those words some day, probably when it is too late, and realize what a fool she has been.

But notice the little parenthesis: “(But thou art rich)” – rich in faith, rich in the grace of God, rich in love, eternal riches. Believers are always enriched by their troubles. The Lord may cut down on our earthly possessions in order that we will enjoy our heavenly riches. So what we learn about the church in Smyrna is that it was a poor rich church. You have to know the Lord in order to understand what that means – a poor rich church!

He also knew “the blasphemy” (He called it what it is) of those Jews who were claiming that they were the Lord’s people because they were Jews, but actually they were not the people of God. They did not know the Lord. Instead, they belonged to “the synagogue of Satan,” their Adversary. Did you know that Satan has his synagogues? He has his churches, too! Go to some churches today and you will find the minister tearing down everything that the Bible teaches. But they are not the Lord’s servants, nor are their churches the Lord’s churches. They all belong to Satan, and they are doing his work.

So to claim that you are a child of God when you are not, is blasphemy. And you and I had better know the difference. The Lord knew all of this. There were a lot of Jews that were deceived by Satan concerning the truth, but they were not deceiving the Lord.

Then the Lord proceeded to tell the church what He did not want them to do. Here is:

III. THE LORD'S COMMANDMENT (Rev. 2:10a).

Their troubles were not over. There was more to come. And there is always the tendency in our hearts that bad matters can only get worse. But still we are not to be afraid. Our circumstances are always in the Lord's hands. He has demonstrated His love for us in so many way. And besides, if we are afraid, we are not trusting the Lord. It is natural to fear; it is Christ-like to trust God. Always you and I need to pay close attention to the *fear nots* of Scripture. And there are several hundred of them.

But this is followed by an ominous prediction made by the Lord which seemed to be the very reason that they should be afraid.

IV. THE LORD'S PREDICTION (Rev. 2:10m).

Now the Lord has more to say about Satan, but this time He calls him "the Devil." This means that he is a slanderer, an accuser. He maligns God. He maligns the people of God. In Revelation his particularly known as "the accuser of the brethren," the people of God. And he does this incessantly, "day and night." See Rev. 12:10. There is no doubt but that he has had some charge to bring before every one of us before God. And unfortunately often his charges are true. But that is one reason why our Lord Jesus Christ is at the right hand of the Father where He lives to make intercession for us. See Heb. 7:25. Christ pleads the merits of His blood, and by His blood we are not only forgiven, but cleansed.

However, many times the Devil brings false accusations. And the Lord knows the difference. But the Devil by his accusations often can have the people of God cast into prison where they are tried. But the Lord never tries to destroy our faith. This is where we often learn that we are more than conquerors because instead of destroying our faith, God uses the trials we have to make us even stronger in the Lord. So God in His infinite wisdom uses our trials for our good instead of the way the Devil

wanted it to be – for our destruction.

What does it mean that the Lord said, “And ye shall have tribulation ten days”? Nobody knows! Did He just mean a literal ten days, or was that a symbolic statement meaning a short time? Again, I say, “Nobody knows.” But we know what it does mean. It means that it is not going on forever. That God is going to make it much shorter than the Devil intended for it to be. The Devil meant it to be eternal. The Lord is going to cut short our suffering regardless of what the circumstances might be.

But following all of this we have another command coupled with a promise from the Lord.

V. ANOTHER OF THE LORD’S COMMANDS AND PROMISES (Rev. 2:10b).

We are to be faithful even though it may lead to death. That means we are to be obedient to the Lord regardless of the cost. We are to do His will, and to trust Him with the outcome. This is where our spiritual riches kick in, so to speak. We face impossible situations only to find that due to God’s presence with us and the supply of His grace for us, the impossible becomes possible – and all to His glory, certainly not ours!

What does the expression mean, “a crown of life”?

I like the illustration I heard many years ago about a crown. If a king has many precious jewels, and he takes them to a jeweler to have them all mounted in a crown which his plans to wear for special occasions, *he has increased the value of each one of those jewels tremendously by putting them into a crown. What you have then is a crown of jewels, or jewels at their best!*

In a limited way now, but in a greater way when we are with the Lord, those who are faithful to the Lord when the going gets bad, will receive “a crown of life,” or *life at its best!*

As the Apostle Paul concluded his section on sanctification in the book of Romans, and started the section on glorification, he wrote these wonderful words in Rom. 8:18:

18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

The persecution that the people of God have experienced in past days has been terrible beyond words to describe it. But take the worst, and Paul, speaking by the Spirit, said that it cannot be compared in any way with the glory that shall be revealed in us.

Now as Paul brought this letter to a close, he wrote down an appeal that came directly from the Lord. Notice what it is, and let each of us take it as written personally to us.

VI. THE LORD'S APPEAL TO HIS READERS (Rev. 2:11a).

There is always so much Scripture that we read but do not hear. We all have ears, but only God can make those ears hear what the Holy Spirit says to His churches in every generation. If we really hear, it is going to make a big difference in our lives. That is how we can tell whether or not we are really hearing the Word. It may have gone first to the church in Smyrna, but it has come this morning to us who make up a part of the Lord's church in Portland. May God give each of us hearing ears.

But there is one more point. It is a promise to help us hear.

VII. THE LORD'S CLOSING PROMISE (Rev. 2:11b).

The first death is physical death; the second death is eternal death. For us physical death is the gateway that leads to heaven, and life at its best. But the second death we have been spared because the Lord Jesus took our "hurt" that we might not have a hurt. Those who kill the body have no more that they can do. But God is the One Who will someday cast many souls into hell where they will be hurt eternally.

Concl: It is very fitting that we should observe the Lord's Supper this morning after having *heard* (I hope) this letter. How thankful we should be for our Lord Jesus Christ. It is only because of the love and grace of God, that He sent His Son into the world to die for us, that we might have the gift of eternal life, and never perish.