REVELATION
The Triumph of Jesus

Last week we moved into a new section of Revelation—*the letters from Jesus to the seven churches of Asia Minor (chapters 2-3).*

These letters are organized *geographically*. A courier would naturally leave the island of Patmos and go to the nearest city which would be Ephesus. He would then move northward along the coast to Smyrna and then Pergamum. From there he would move inland to Thyatira and then he would turn to the south and make his way to Sardis, Philadelphia and finally to Laodicea.

These letters were also organized *thematically*. Dennis Johnson, in his commentary on Revelation, explained…

> **The letters are grouped in two triads, with the longest of the seven, Thyatira, serving as the hinge between the triads. In the first triad (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum) the summons to hear precedes the promise to the victor; in the central letter (Thyatira) and the second triad (Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea) the order of these two elements is reversed. Within each triad the central letter (Smyrna and Philadelphia) contains commendation without rebuke, reference to opposition from those who falsely claim to be Jews, and the promise of a crown. The opening and closing letters of the second triad (Sardis, Laodicea) are those in which the dominant tone is rebuke.** [1]

The letters follow a standard template which includes eight basic components…

- **Address—"To the angel of the church in…"**
- **Command to write**
- **Identification of the speaker**
- **The church's situation—Introduced by "I know."**
- **Call to repentance or faithfulness**
- **Reinforced by threat or promise**
- **Summons to hear**
- **Promise to the victor**

[11] Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation, Dennis Johnson, pp. 69-70.

One aspect of these letters holds them together like glue—*they all needed to hear the voice of Jesus.* For that matter, churches today need to hear the voice of Jesus also. Dennis Johnson observed…

> **His voice addresses us today in His letters to the seven churches in Asia, for each letter is what the Spirit says to all the churches….His voice comforts our weak and wounded hearts, diagnoses our diseases, shatters our dreams of ease here and now, and calls us forward to the consummation of His victory in the new Jerusalem.** [2]

Let's consider the letter to Smyrna. Open your Bible to Revelation 2:8-11. Of all the cities of Asia, Smyrna was the loveliest. Men called it the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia and the flower of Asia. The reverence and loyalty of Smyrna for Rome stretched as far back as 195 B.C. It was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the goddess Roma. And in A.D. 26, when the cities of Asia Minor were competing for the privilege of erecting a temple to the emperor Tiberius, Smyrna was picked for that honor.[3]

The believers in this city faced persecution because of their faith in Jesus. The name *Smyrna* is related to the word *myrrh* which is an ordinary perfume that was used in the anointing oil of the tabernacle and in embalming dead bodies (cf. Ex. 30:23; Ps. 45:8; Song 3:6; Matt. 2:11; Mark 15:23; John 19:39). Myrrh was produced by crushing a fragrant plant. The church at Smyrna was crushed by persecution but in the process these believers gave off a fragrant aroma—*the aroma of Christ*.

Revelation 2:8… **"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this "**

Often when somebody wants to speak with authority into our lives we want to know their credentials. If this is a policeman, where is his badge? If it is a doctor, where is his/her white coat and stethoscope? It it is a teacher, show me your teacher's license. So, we need to ask ourselves two questions. Who is the one speaking here? What is His message?

"The first and the last" … In the Old Testament that is a title belonging to God. "I am the first," Isaiah heard God say, "and I am the last" (Isaiah 44:6; 48:12). Jesus has the right to speak into our lives because He is God in the flesh. He is the Creator and the Lord of history.

---

[2] Johnson, p. 67

[3] *The Revelation of John : Volume 1*, ed. William Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976), 74.

"Who was dead and has come to life says this"— Jesus is portrayed as the eternal One (cf. 1:8, 17; 21:6; 22:13) who suffered death at the hands of His persecutors and then was resurrected from the grave (cf. 1:5).[4] These aspects of Jesus were especially relevant to the Christians at Smyrna who, like the Lord in His death, were experiencing severe persecution.[5] The Lord Jesus knows what life is like at its worst and He has experienced even the bitterness of death.[6] The Risen Christ has *conquered* death, sin, and Satan! [7]

Corrie ten Boom said this as she emerged from a Nazi concentration camp: ***"There is no pit so deep but that God isn't deeper still."***[8]

Okay, we know who Jesus is and now we have a clear idea of what He wanted to say to the church in Smyrna. Jesus didn't soft sell the gospel. He explicitly told His followers that there was a cross for them to bear—a price for them to pay.

John 15:18–20… **"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated you*. 19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. 20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also."**

Matthew 24:9… **"Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name."**

---

[4]*The Revelation of John : Volume 1*, ed. William Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976), 81.

[5]John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:934.

[6]*The Revelation of John : Volume 1*, ed. William Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976), 82.

[7]*The Revelation of John : Volume 1*, ed. William Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976), 82.

[8]Publisher Paul Westervelt, *Discipleship Journal, Issue 17 (September/October 1983)* (NavPress, 1983; 2006).

Jesus has every right to demand the love and loyalty of every single believer because of His credentials. He is the one, true God. He has conquered Satan, sin, and death. Now, look at what He says next…

Revelation 2:9… **I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

When you are going through a tough time, it is such a comfort to know that someone really knows what you are experiencing and they genuinely care for you. In verse 9, the Lord Jesus expresses this to the suffering believers in Smyrna. He lets them know what HE KNOWS …

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich)"… The thing that impresses me here is that nothing escapes the notice of the Lord Jesus Christ! There are two words for "*know*". One means to know by observation. The other one which is used here means to know by experience. The word here means to know by experience.

The word *"tribulation"* here refers to intense pressure that was placed on true believers because of their faithful devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. This intense pressure was placed upon them because…

- **They would not worship the emperor Domitian.**
- **They would not worship the pagan gods.**

As a result…

- **They were excluded from the guilds (unions).**
- **They were hated by the Jews who still rejected Jesus Christ and eventually they turned them in to the Roman authorities. (Acts 13:6,45; 17:5ff; 19:9)**

Yes, they were persecuted because of their faith in Jesus. In addition, they paid a horrendous price economically. The word used for *"poverty"* means "abject poverty, possessing absolutely nothing." They lost their jobs. They couldn't buy the necessary food. They were totally impoverished.

Tertullian of Carthage was the pastor of a church in northern Africa around the year 200 A.D. Some of the members of his congregation argued, saying…

> **Tertullian, we must burn incense to this pagan god even though we are Christians. We just have to do it. We won't mean it, but we will do it. Tertullian said, "Why?" They said, "Because we have to work!" Tertullian said, "Why do you have to work?" They said, "Because we have to eat." He said, "Why do you have to eat?" They said, "Because we have to live." Tertullian the pastor looked at them and said, "No you**

don't have to work you don't have to eat and you don't have to live. The only thing you have to do is be faithful to God.

But they were rich! They lived for eternal values that would never change and riches that could never be taken away. In fact, their suffering for Christ only increased their riches. This parenthesis shows the spiritual riches of this church in contrast with the spiritual poverty in Laodicea.

Revelation 3:17… **'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked'**

Smyrna was a rich poor church. They were rich in grace, in love, in mercy, in faith, etc.[9] Laodicea was a poor rich church.

"And the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"… A large Jewish community also thrived in Smyrna. The Jewish religion was accepted by Rome; but they certainly would not cooperate with the Christian faith. So, from both Jews and Gentiles, the Christians in Smyrna received both slander and suffering. Understand this, Satan uses people to accomplish his purposes! To blaspheme a Christian is to blaspheme Christ just as to persecute a Christian is to persecute Christ (Acts 9:4-5). Throughout the Roman Empire 6 slanders were leveled against the church…

- **Cannibalism because of the Lord's Supper**
- **Orgies of lust because of the Agape Feasts**
- **Anti-family because families would often split over their belief about Jesus**
- **Atheism because Christians would worship without images**
- **Political disloyalty because believers would not say, "Caesar is Lord."**
- **They were arsonists because they taught the world would end with fire**

It's interesting to see in the book of Acts how the Jewish populations of the Gentile cities at first accepted the apostles who brought the gospel to them. Then, their curiosity turned to anger and violence (Acts 13:5, 15-42; 14:1; 17:2,10-11).

Jesus referred to these compromising Jews as *the synagogue of Satan.* This word, <u>*synagogue*</u> literally means a coming together, an assembly, a congregation. It is as if Jesus said—"You call yourselves the assembly of God when, in fact, you are the assembly of the devil."

[9]A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Re 2:9.

Let me make this clear. The true people of God are defined by their commitment to Christ, not their genealogy or their religious affiliation. John Wesley once said of certain men who were presenting a crude picture of God—***"Your God is my devil."*** [10]

The Lord Jesus Christ fully comprehended the pressure, the poverty, and the problem of the believers in Smyrna. Listen, when we take a stand for the Lord and refuse to back down and when we pay a price for being faithful, the Lord Jesus fully comprehends every aspect of our struggle and He makes His grace available in order to meet our needs.

Now, let's look at the next verse…

Revelation 2:10… **'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.'**

This truth is absolutely vital to every believer in this room. You might say this is your survival training for a time of persecution. What did the Lord say to them? What is He saying to us tonight?

1. You Must Be Fearless.

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer" … To be a Christian during this period of history was dangerous to say the least. The tortures inflicted upon these believers were gruesome. Some believers were strapped on the rack where their wrists were tied to the wheel and their ankles were fastened to the floor. Every time they refused to acknowledge Caesar as lord, the rack was turned. This went on until they were torn limb from limb. Others were thrown into boiling oil. Others were thrown to the lions.

One of the repeated commands in the Bible is this one—*"Do not fear."* Since it is a command of our Lord, we must obey it!

"Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days"… Jesus assured them that He knew the devil's plans and was in complete control of the situation. He allows believers to be imprisoned and tried as traitors to Rome. Yet their tribulation would not be long; in the Bible, *"ten days"* signifies a brief time. In the Roman Empire, prison normally ended with the person's execution.

[10] *The Revelation of John : Volume 1*, ed. William Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976), 80.

Why would Jesus allow His church to be *tested?* The chaff must be separated from the wheat. The Bride of Christ must be pure and holy. The purpose of the test is to prove that Satan cannot destroy genuine saving faith!

All over the world today, the Lord Jesus is allowing believers/His church to be tested by persecution, poverty, and problems. We are being tested personally and corporately by the coronal virus, by increasing governmental pressure, and by a general hatred directed to anyone who stands for Jesus and His Word. Listen to Jesus…

Matthew 10:24–28… **"A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. 25 "It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more *will they malign* the members of his household! 26 "Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 "What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear *whispered* in *your* ear, proclaim upon the housetops. 28 "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."**

Isaiah 41:10… **'Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'**

We must be fearless!

2. You Must Be Faithful.

Revelation 2:10… **Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

Let's look at this thought carefully…

"Be faithful until death"…The important thing was *faithfulness,* standing true to Christ no matter what the government or the people might threaten to do. This verb is a present, middle, imperative and it can be translated like this— *"Keep on becoming faithful."*

Corrie ten Boom was imprisoned in Ravensbruk, the infamous German prison camp where more than 50,000 women were killed. She wrote…

> **It is necessary, when we prepare ourselves for the endtime, also to be prepared to die for Jesus.**

When I think of being faithful, I think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to bow down to his golden image and mocked them with these words—*"What god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"* I love their response…

Daniel 3:17–18… **"If it be *so,* our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 "But *even* if *He does* not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."**

Now that is what I call being faithful. Will you be faithful to Jesus even if it costs you a promotion, a job, or even your life?

3. You Must Have Foresight

Revelation 2:10… **Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

Oh, what a promise this is…

"And I will give you the crown of life"… Your faithfulness to Christ will be rewarded! In Greek there are two words for *crown*, *diadēma*, which means the *royal crown*, and *stephanos*, which has usually something to do with *joy* and *victory*.

This is the winner's crown awarded at the annual athletic games. Smyrna was a key participant in the games, so this promise would be especially meaningful to believers living there. The Lord reinforced the promise given by James.

James 1:12… **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.**

Now look at verse 11…

Revelation 2:11… **'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'**

As overcomers, they had nothing to fear. Even if they were martyred, they would be ushered into glory, wearing crowns! Paul wrote…

2 Corinthians 4:17… **For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison**

Romans 8:18… **For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.**

Matthew 5:10–12… **"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 "Rejoice**

and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches"…This stresses how vital and significant the Word of the Lord is for us and it stresses how important it is for us to hear and obey the Word.

"He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death"…This refers to the awful judgment of the second death, which is the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14; 21:8). Persecuted believers may suffer physical death but they will never experience the second death of hell! John used the strongest negative available in the Greek language.

Hear the Word of the Lord church. This is your strategy for the day of persecution that is surely coming!

The pastor of the church in Smyrna was Polycarp, himself a disciple of John the apostle. In AD 155, Polycarp was marched into the amphitheater where a mob was waiting to see this elderly man of God die. He was commanded to deny Christ to which he replied, ***"Eighty-six years have I served Him and He never did me any harm; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"***

The governor shouted, "I'll have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude."

Polycarp answered, ***"You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour and after a little while is extinguished. But you are ignorant of the fires of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Bring on what you will."***

The crowd gathered wood and threw torches on the pyre. Their hatred was bitter and they cheered as the godly man was brought to the stake. As the flames began to curl around his body, Polycarp prayed—***"I thank you that you have graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour, that I may be a part of the number of martyrs to die for Christ."***

Let me ask you, will you be faithful to Jesus even if there is a price to be paid?