

"The Letters to the 7 Churches"

Part 2

Revelation 2:1-3:22

Introduction: Last week in our study of the book of Revelation we started into the letters to the 7 churches and last week we looked at the Church of Ephesus. Ephesus is often referred to as "The Church which Left it First Love". The church at Ephesus was a doctrinally sound church and it was a church that was truly involved in serving the Lord. The church at Ephesus had some of the very best Bible teachers stand at their pulpit. There was Paul, Apollos, Timothy and the Apostle John. They knew the Truth of God's Word very well and they also put it into practice.

But there was a problem and the problem was they had allowed their LOVE for the Lord to grow cold. They had LEFT their first love which means it was by choice. They were focused more upon SERVICE than they were upon their RELATIONSHIP with Jesus Christ. They had lost sight of what Eternal Life was all about.

John 17:3

³ And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

These are the Words of Jesus Christ. He defines Eternal Life as a RELATIONSHIP. Jesus went on in the letter to Ephesus and He gave them a cure. They needed to:

1. Remember
2. Repent
3. Return

Now in our study today we come to the 2nd letter.

The Church at Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

Background:

We do not know how this church began but many believe it was a sister church of Ephesus started by the saints at Ephesus. The churches were only about 35 miles apart. This

church became the focus of Satan. He placed a bullseye on this church and it became known as The Suffering Church or The Persecuted Church.

The persecution at the time came from the Roman government. These churches were under the rule of the Roman Emperors. We cannot understand what it was that these believers faced.

I want to borrow the words of John Phillips and describe one of the leaders of the Roman Empire.

"He was just 3 years old when his father died. It was little loss to the boy because his father had been a killer, a bully, and a cheat. His mother took over the family trade and continued the boy's education. She murdered his stepfather with a bowl of poison mushrooms. He was reared in squalor and proved a notable son to his parents. While still young he committed his first murder, killing a teenage boy who stood in his way, while watching him die with callous indifference. He married at 15 but soon had his wife killed. He married again and slew his 2nd wife too. In order to marry a third time he murdered the husband of the woman he wanted. His mother annoyed him so he arranged her murder, first by guile, but when that was unsuccessful, without pretense. He was an ugly man with a bull neck, beetle brows, a flat nose, and a tough mouth. He had a pot belly, spindly legs, bad skin, and an offensive odor. At the age of 31 he was sentenced to death by flogging, he fled to a dingy basement and, in the house of a slave he cut his own throat. He gave the early church it first taste of things to come. His name was Nero."

Can you imagine living under the rule of someone like that?

Peter wrote his 2 letters to believers who experienced the persecution of Nero. Nero had a passion to build and as he sat in his palace and over looked Rome there was nothing left to build so it is believed he set Rome on fire so that he could rebuild it. The streets were so narrow and the wood of the houses so dry that the fire leaped over the streets and Rome burned to the ground.

When the Romans began to discover that Nero set the fire he needed a scapegoat and so he pointed to a group that was already hated, the Christians. This is when the persecution became very intense.

Under Nero the believers were cast into boiling oil, they were fried in pans, they were racked, they were placed in the arena with wild animals, and they were burned alive to light

the Imperial Garden at Nero's palace as they were hung on crosses. Let me show you something which Peter wrote.

1 Peter 4:12-14

¹² *Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:*

¹³ *But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.*

¹⁴ *If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.*

As we approach the letter to Smyrna Nero is gone but there is a new wave of persecution that is about to be launched. The Emperor is Domitian and he also will target the church at Smyrna. He would be the first to demand Emperor worship as Lord.

I. The Greeting

Notice Revelation 2:8

Jesus identifies Himself as the First and the Last and He that was dead and is alive. The title First and Last refer to His eternality and the title of being the one who was dead and is alive refers to his experience.

This greeting was given as an encouragement to the church at Smyrna. They were about to face some very difficult persecution and Jesus desired for them to know that He had already walked that path.

Hebrews 2:9-10

⁹ *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.*

¹⁰ *For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.*

Jesus had been made perfect in EXPERIENCE through the sufferings which He faced and this is what He was communicating to the church. He could identify with them and offer the comfort which they needed.

Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴ Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.

¹⁵ For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.

¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

II. The Commendation

Notice Revelation 2:9

Jesus is going to focus upon their persecution but before He does he comforts them with the words "I KNOW". He missed absolutely nothing which they were going through. He knew their works and He knew their tribulation.

The poverty spoken of here was the result of the persecution. Because of their stand for Jesus Christ they had been stripped of much of this world's goods. But Jesus said they were RICH. Jesus measures riches far different than our world measures riches. These people had NOTHING as far as this world was concerned but in the eyes of the Lord they were RICH for they had GREAT FAITH. They were rich in FAITH.

James 2:5

⁵ Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

Let me show you how the world measures wealth.

Luke 21:16-21

¹⁶ And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully:

¹⁷ And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?

¹⁸ And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods.

¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

²⁰ But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

²¹ So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

The church at Smyrna was RICH toward God. They were a LIGHT in the midst of the darkness. The writer of Hebrews described the Old Testament saints in Hebrews 11 and his words fit the saints at Smyrna also.

Hebrews 11:34, 36-39a

³⁴ *Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.*

³⁶ *And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment:*

³⁷ *They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented:*

³⁸ *(Of whom the world was not worthy[©] they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.*

³⁹ *And these all, having obtained a good report through faith,*

III. **The Pretenders**

Notice Revelation 2:8

Here we can see where some of the persecution came from. There were people who claimed to be Jews who were not. These were Jewish people who claimed to be saved but were not so they were a group of Judaizers who were plaguing the church.

Unbelieving Jews were a great problem within the church from the beginning.

Acts 13:50

⁵⁰ *But the Jews stirred up the devout and honourable women, and the chief men of the city, and raised persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them out of their coasts.*

Acts 14:2

² *But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren.*

These are just 2 verses but we can see that the unbelieving Jews brought much heartache to the early church. This is exactly what was happening at Smyrna. So they had pressure from the political arena and from the religious arena. Now there was far more to this than meets the eye.

Listen to these words:

"Judaism had a special privilege that the Romans allowed only them, freedom from worshipping the Roman gods and participating in the Greco-Roman cults. Christianity was considered part of Judaism at least through the Jewish War (A.D. 66-70) and also benefited from this privilege. However, Judaism tried more and more to separate itself from Christianity and get the Roman Empire to recognize that Christianity was not exempt. . . . the Romans imposed on Jews [the Judean tax] that allowed the Jews freedom from participation in the imperial cult. Christians refused to pay this tax; thus the Jews denounced Christians as not being true Judeans and as being troublemakers.⁶⁵

As Christianity became separated from Judaism the pressure began to increase.

IV. The Comfort

Notice Revelation 2:10a

The next wave of persecution was coming.

Listen to the words of Barclay:

"For a man to become a Christian anywhere was to become an outlaw. In Smyrna above all places, for a man to enter the Christian Church was literally to take his life in his hands. In Smyrna the church was a place for heroes."

They would be tried by the Devil. They would be cast into prison and for some there would be a 10 day period which would include intense persecution.

The reason it would be only 10 days is because Jesus would not allow it to go any further.

1 Corinthians 10:13

¹³ *There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*

Let us always keep in mind that our Lord controls the tests and the trials which come into our life and it is the Lord who refines us in the furnaces of affliction.

Malachi 3:2-3

² *But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap:*

³ *And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.*

Zechariah 13:9

⁹ *And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God.*

V. **The Command and the Promise**

Notice Revelation 2:10b

They were expected to be faithful unto death and they would be given the martyr's crown.

Conclusion:

This is what the Lord expects of us also. There is not one Word in the Bible that promises the believer ease and comfort.