

**Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb**  
*Smyrna*  
Revelation 2:8-11

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**Text:**

<sup>8</sup> “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.’ <sup>9</sup> “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup> Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. <sup>11</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’”

**Introduction:**

A great number of American Christians come to the book of Revelation with the kind of attitude and emotion like that of a criminal having just received his “get out of jail free” card. It’s a kind of triumphalism that sees Christians as winning in the end such that they are now blind to the reality of life between the here-and-now and the then-and-there.

Triumphalism is out the window when you read this short letter to the Smyrnan church. Do you know what I mean by triumphalism? I mean an overly giddy heart that starts to believe it can suffer no wrong because it will win in the end.

Triumphalism is extremely dangerous to the Christian. Of course, we win in the end; but our faith in an eternal victory must never cloud our vision of reality right now. We will continue to live in a fallen world ruled by sin, Satan and certain death. The Bible is unequivocal when it speaks of Christian suffering. Christians, by definition, suffer.

Smyrna is the only one of the seven ancient cities that still exists today; it is the city of Izmir in modern-day Turkey. As an ancient city, it was extremely beautiful and important. It was a coastal town about 35 miles due north of Ephesus on the Hermus river. It was regarded as the pride of Asia. Coins have been found with the inscription, “First of Asia in beauty and size.”

The city was founded very early on and was completely destroyed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and rebuilt later in 280 B.C. after the time of Alexander the Great. It was known as the city that came back to life. It is for this reason, then that Jesus addressed the church in Smyrna with his self-description as the “first and the last, who died and came to life.” But more than that, Jesus knew the tribulation of a small church that was wondering if it was going to be put to death. We’ll say more about that later.

The church of Smyrna is one of only two of the seven churches that receive no criticism from Christ. The other church is the Philadelphian church which also was a tiny church undergoing persecution. That is an interesting observation in itself. Our question, then, is what was driving the persecution?

## ***Emperor Worship***

A little bit of ancient history helps immensely with our understanding of this passage. In the Roman Empire, cities vied desperately to become seats for emperor worship. They wanted to be awarded the right to build a temple to the emperor. In 29 A.D. all Asian cities were competing for the coveted favor of erecting a temple in honor of Emperor Tiberius. Smyrna won! It was a city fervent with emperor worship and patriotic loyalty to the empire.

After Augustus Caesar died at the beginning of the 1st Century A.D. the Roman senate voted to have him *reified*. That is, they declared him to have been promoted to a god-like status. But a bit later, along came the emperor named Caligula in A.D. 30 who was literally a mad-man and a butcher. He declared as good news to the senate that he had been *apotheosized*. He was now a part of the Roman pantheon though he was still living. In fact, Caligula was so mad that he actually declared his horse to be apotheosized as well so that both he and his horse were gods. There are quite a number of ancient writings that discuss this action. But as mad as he was, he established a tradition that each of the successive emperors came to be viewed as deities in the pantheon while they were ruling. At that point loyalty to the emperor came bound up with the admission that the emperor was god. So you had cities that would vie to become seats for emperor worship. They would erect temples to the emperor where the Roman citizens would come and burn incense or pour out wine libations to the emperor. The net result was that it tied fidelity to the Roman politics with religion. It was very effective.

Added to this is the Roman means for securing peace among the peoples and lands it was conquering. In earlier times, say the times of the Persians and Assyrians and Chaldeans in the OT, the conquering nations would conquer a people and then deport them to another place. This was an attempt at securing peace. They believed that if they could break up the nexus between a peoples' land, its gods and their heritage, they would be less likely to retaliate. In addition to that, these conquering governments would enlist the finest of the enemy nation's youth into their government class. So this is what you see in the days of Daniel, for example.

The Romans, however, had a different tactic. They performed god-swaps. Once they moved in and conquered a nation they would embrace some of that country's gods into their own pantheon and then insist that they in turn adopt some of the Roman gods into their own. This, too, was effective in keeping the nations from retaliating and rebelling. They could not pray to their gods for deliverance because now the Romans were praying to the same god as well.

But the Romans made one exception to this rule, namely, the Jews. They viewed the Jews as this extremely austere and mysterious people who held quite insistently on worshipping but one God – and at that, it was a God whom they could not see. In point of fact, many of the Romans suspected that the Jews were really atheists who held to no god because they could not point to him. So the Romans could not adopt the Jewish God and add him to their pantheon because they could not liken him and enshrine him. So the Jews were exempted from Roman worship including the oath of emperor worship. They were the only people not required to offer incense to the emperor. That meant, therefore, that as long as the Christians could be viewed as a subset of the Jews, they would be free from persecution for not worshipping the emperor.

You will notice that early on in church history, in the book of Acts particularly, most of the persecution falling on the church was Jewish persecution – synagogue persecution. It was Jew-on-Jew persecution largely. But as the church grew and became more and more Gentile in its make-up, the easiest course of action was for the Jews to tip-off the Romans that the Christians really weren't Jews. So the wrath of Rome would come upon the church at the hand of the Jews. And that is precisely what was happening in Smyrna. They were suffering from the "slander of those who say they are Jews and are not" (v.9). You can see a kind of irony here in Jesus words, can't you?

It is extremely helpful to notice at this point in the text that Jesus, as quoted by John, supports what Paul had been saying all along, namely, that there are physical Jews who are not really Jews because they have rejected Christ. God's loyalty to the Jewish people was not tied to their fleshly heritage but to their spiritual heritage. They are here regarded as being of the "synagogue of Satan." You recall, of course, that Jesus had told the Pharisees that they were of their father the devil and that they did the works of their father (cf. John 8:44). So here in Smyrna they are slandering the Christians to incite the Roman authorities against them because they refused to participate in emperor worship.

### *Nature of Persecution*

Now, what was the nature of their persecution? 2:8-11 is a classic example, I think, of the beauty of reading a passage in light of its historical context when we are so prone to read it in light of our own context. For example, when you read that someone is going to be thrown into prison, you are tempted to read that through the lens of 20<sup>th</sup> century incarceration and not 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman incarceration.

Dennis Johnson helps us: "Roman authorities used incarceration not for long-term containment but for short-term custody of those awaiting trial or sentence of death." In other words, they did not use prisons as punishment the way we do. The Roman prisons were for short and temporary custody until you could be bound over for trial and then sentenced. Then, should you receive a Roman sentence, there were three kinds: exile, labor camp or death, either by beheading or thrown to the animals in the coliseum.

So John says they will "throw some of you into prison that you may be tested; and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful until death" (v.10). What does he mean?

Joseph Tson is a Romanian exile and a contemporary of ours. He was imprisoned in communist Romania under Ceausescu's dictatorship and afraid of the potential for martyrdom. Thus, he devoted thirty years of his life to the study and writing of suffering and martyrdom and his book is very helpful on the topic. Listen to what he uncovered as it relates to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman practice:

In the case of the Christians in John's lifetime, the procedure was as follows: The Christian who was betrayed to the authorities was asked whether he was a Christian or not. If he answered that he was not a Christian he would be told to prove it in this way: he had to pick up some incense from a bowl, to spread it over the flame on the altar of the emperor-god, and to declare that "Caesar is Lord." Sometimes, instead of burning incense, he had to make a libation, which meant that he had to pour some wine on the same altar and worship the emperor, acknowledging that he was lord. If the arrested individual performed all these satisfactorily, he would be given a certificate stating that he had worshipped Caesar; the certificate would enable him to leave the prison as a free man.

Of course, a Christian could not comply with such orders. He would say, "Christ is Lord," not Caesar. But if he refused to worship Caesar, he would immediately be given into the hands of the torturers. The Christian would be savagely tortured for a whole day in order to force him to deny his Lord and worship Caesar. If he endured the torture all day, at one point the torturers would cease, realizing they could not break him. This being the case, the magistrate would simply pronounce the sentence of death: usually a public execution in the arena, most often by beheading and sometimes by crucifixion or by being thrown to the wild beasts. But there was another procedure of which we are not aware. Because the authorities did not want to let the public see the open wounds of the Christians, they would keep the Christians in prison for a short while, until the wounds inflicted by the torturers would at least superficially heal; this could mean a period of ten days or a little longer. Finally, after this short time in prison, they would be taken into the arena for public execution (275).

This makes John's words stand up and take notice, doesn't it? You will be "tested," have "tribulation for ten days." "Be faithful unto death." These Smyrnan Christians were very likely on their way to martyrdom. What would you say to them? What words of hope could you possibly give?

Let's look a little deeper at this passage to see the kind of comfort Jesus gave them.

### ***Words of Hope***

#### **1. Hope comes with the identification of Jesus.**

I see two prongs to this identification of Jesus. Imagine that we are the Smyrnan church assembled in the first century for worship. We come into the gathering all abuzz on this particular day because we heard that the elders would be standing to read a letter we just received from the Apostle John – the book of Revelation. We assemble with some mixed emotions as we quickly notice that six of our brothers and sisters are not with us because they have been betrayed by a brother, a mother, a daughter-in-law, a neighbor. We have heard of the beatings they endured on Thursday and we know the track record. We know what's coming. But nonetheless, we have a letter from John – one of the last apostles remaining alive – though we know of his own arrest, beating and exile to the labor camp on Patmos.

The elder stands and clears his throat; he is so excited to hold in his hands this word from the beloved apostle that he is visibly shaking. He begins...

<sup>1</sup>The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place...

Whoa! Wait a minute. How would those words have sounded to the Smyrnan church? Would they have heard those words to mean that Jesus is going to give you a detailed description of the alignment of nations and the war that will end the world...Or, would they have heard it as though Jesus is going to give you the kind of perspective you need for enduring the martyrdom you may face this month?

He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup> who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. <sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. <sup>4</sup> John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ the faithful...

...and their Greek ears would have heard the word *martus* – the faithful martyr witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

They are hearing the words from Jesus who is the faithful martyr. So when Jesus says to the church at Smyrna, "I know your tribulation and poverty..." He does not mean, "I can give you the 15 characteristics of martyrdom." He means, "I can identify with your suffering because I was there!" This is the kind of identification that brings real comfort. So Jesus says to them (second prong of his identification), "These are the words of the first and last, who died and came to life...BE faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." He identifies himself as the resurrected victorious and triumphant Lamb who can in turn reward the conquering Smyrnan martyr with the crown of life.

The choice is simple. You can chose death now and receive life later; or you can choose life now and receive death later. You choose! “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (v.11). You see, their victory is going to come through death.

Can you feel the comfort and the strength welling up inside the Smyrnan Christians?

## **2. Hope comes in the bed-rock belief of God’s sovereignty.**

Look at what he says in v.10: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, etc.”

Throughout the book of Revelation there is this interplay between God’s sovereignty and the devil’s activity. Think of it. Who is going to be subjecting the Smrynan believers to suffering and martyrdom? At one level it will be the betraying Jews. It is at the hand of the slandering Jews that they will suffer. But at another level it will be at the hand of the Roman government that they will be put to death. Yet at a higher level, it will be the devil himself who is causing their pain. But the question remains is that all? Or is there one more level? Who is telling them of what Satan is going to do? Is it not the exalted Christ? Christ is announcing, “Behold...” and he shows no sign of stepping in to save the day. In other words, the activity of Satan in killing saints is all to be seen as taking place under the watchful eyes of the same Lord who holds the churches in his right hand.

Christians are at war, Yes! But do not be mistaken. We do not live in a dualistic universe where there is a good god and a bad god sort of battling out for territorial dominance. No way! There is one God and everything – absolutely everything is firmly in his grasp including the very evil that may claim the life of his saints.

In this fallen and broken world, the devil does things. Sometime he is to be avoided and sometimes he is to be endured; but not for one minute does God give up his sovereign control of the universe. Here is God announcing what is going to happen and how it is going to end up. It is not as though he has been taken by surprise.

## **3. Hope comes in living with an eternal perspective.**

There is a choice to be made here. “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown (which is) life. He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.”

The choice is between the life that the world gives and the life that God gives. You can deny the faith and have life now; or you can defend the faith, receive death and have life in eternity. Which is it going to be?

This is a theme that will appear over and over throughout the book. In ch.12-13 it will be the choice between brands or marks. There the Christians will choose between receiving the mark of the beast and suffering the wrath of God or they can receive the mark of the Lamb and suffer the wrath of the beast. Which is it? There is a choice. Which one do you want? You’re going to suffer one.

You must view life from an eternal perspective. The individual who views life from a completely material view cannot make sense of the book of Revelation.

## **Conclusion:**

You see, I am afraid that many conservative evangelical Americans have been set up for a mighty fall because they have been taught repeatedly that the church misses out on the tribulation. Therefore, I think the western church has been ill-equipped by its pastors and teachers for suffering. Yet nowhere in the Bible does it teach that God's people are exempt from tribulation. It only teaches that we are safe from God's eternal wrath. But much of the wrath being inflicted by Satan on the world today is coming as massive tribulation to the church. Only the western church is not suffering tribulation today. We are not the sum total of the church, however.

Jesus seems to insinuate that people can be strengthened against persecution by knowing about it in advance. This is not the place for a triumphalistic attitude: "We are on the winning side!" Christians become happy victorious people. No! There can be a certain strength by saying, "Look! This is where we are in history and what we are going through. Let us be strengthened by opening our eyes and strengthening our minds and hearts before God. This is what we are going through."

I am afraid that the American glasses for looking at the future are myopic and cloudy because of our Pre-Tribulational theology and our safe and secure national history. Is it possible that we have adopted a theological system that makes sense for Americans in the West but could not possibly make sense to the rest of the world that is suffering greatly today in persecution? What happens if things change in America and we have to start suffering? Are we equipping the church to suffer? Or are we shooting ourselves in the foot by promoting a kind of triumphal theology that preaches the church misses out on tribulation? That's dangerous!

We need to start preparing ourselves for what could and might happen. Hope for enduring tribulation does not come from the news that you will escape it. You will escape the wrath of God in all eternity; but you have no guarantees of escaping the wrath of the beast today. Are you prepared? What will give you hope?

Hope comes with the identification of Jesus that he has both been there and conquered that; hope comes from the bed-rock trust in God's sovereign designs; and hope comes from living life with an eternal perspective.

I, for one, want to be a pastor that equips you for living by equipping you for suffering and dying.