

## **Series Revelation**

### **This Message #4 Revelation 2:8-11**

Chapter 1 of the book of Revelation provided us with some background information about the writer, John. He had been banished by Roman officials to the island of Patmos. Chapter 1 also provided us with a vision of the glorified person of Jesus standing among seven lampstands which represented seven church fellowships in Asia Minor. That vision was the first of many describing the activities of Jesus during this present age, activities which will continue until the end of the age. In chapters 2 and 3 Jesus provides us with His assessment of the spiritual condition of seven church fellowships.

Last week, the focus was on the church fellowship in the city of Ephesus. Today we will think about the community of believers in the city of Smyrna, an attractive and prosperous city located about 35 miles north of Ephesus. Smyrna had a population almost as great as Ephesus, and, like the city of Ephesus, it had access to the Mediterranean Sea and was a bustling commercial center.

There are several other important characteristics about Smyrna I want to mention: It was a much more modern city than Ephesus. In 600 B. C. the old city of Smyrna was destroyed after which it lay in ruins for more than three centuries. Alexander the Great ordered that it be rebuilt as an example of Greek architecture. The work on the new city was substantially completed in 290 B. C.

Secondly, by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, the city had become a center of emperor worship. A temple built in honor of the Roman emperor Tiberias was a featured landmark in the city. A few years before John was sent into exile, emperor worship became compulsory for every Roman citizen. Once a year, each citizen was required, on threat of death, to burn incense on the altar dedicated to Caesar and to state publically that "Caesar is lord." A certificate was then issued which validated the person's loyalty to the empire. Most Christians refused to perform this ritual and therefore subjected themselves to a great deal of political pressure and persecution.

Thirdly, the city had a reputation as an intellectual center because several schools of science and medicine were located there. And there was one more important characteristic about Smyrna which had a bearing on the circumstances of believers. There was a large and clamorous colony of Jews who lived in the city. The Roman government had granted permission for the Jews throughout the empire to practice their monotheistic faith. This was a political concession to obtain from the Jews a measure of cooperation in order to keep the peace.

During the middle years of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, Christianity was considered to be an “off-shoot” of the Jewish religion, and, hence, Christians benefited from the same protections granted to the Jews. However, the orthodox Jews refused to accept the individuals of their own race who had become Christians and they lobbied the Romans to classify Christians as heretics of Judaism. As a result, Christians throughout the Roman empire lost their protected status. This was one of the significant factors which led to the persecution of believers in Smyrna, which we will read about in the verses.

By the way, Smyrna is still an important city in the country of Turkey today. It is now named Izmir.

### **Read Revelation 2:8-11**

Our reading indicates that the church of Smyrna was spiritual healthy. There are no words of criticism or condemnation. The believers in Smyrna were being faithful in spite of religious and cultural pressures brought on them by both Roman gentiles and ethnic Jews. The believers were suffering persecution and rejection from everyone around them. The words of Jesus were intended to give them encouragement and hope.

Jesus reminded the readers that He is “the First and the Last,” and the One “who died and came to life again.” These statements are repeated from Jesus’ initial encounter with John in chapter 1. Because the believers in Smyrna faced possible death because of their commitment to Him, Jesus wanted them to know that He was the Creator of and the Lord of history, the One who was in ultimate control, that He had overcome suffering and death, and that He would be with them and reward those who would be overcomers. The believers in Smyrna needed assurance that their ultimate future was secure, even though they were presently in distressing circumstances.

Each of the statements made by Jesus to the seven church fellowships ends with a promise to the believer who is an “overcomer.” The Bible has a unique perspective on the meaning of “overcoming.” Overcoming is described in terms of warfare, and it is often referred to as spiritual warfare. The life of the sincere and genuine believer is one of unrelenting warfare against the powers of evil. Spiritual warfare does not primarily occur in the physical realm of bodily suffering and death, although it usually involves physical suffering and can involve death.

Overcoming in the Biblical sense represents spiritual victory. It is overcoming every temptation to turn away from loyalty and devotion to Jesus. It is remaining true to Him regardless of worldly persecution and threat. The pathway of spiritual victory is love and faithfulness and steadfastness to Jesus. Ideally, every believer is ready to lay down his/her life for the honor of Jesus. This book, and much of Scripture, describes the spiritual struggle between Jesus and the forces of evil for the hearts of people. The overcomer is the believer who is unswervingly loyal to the Lord Jesus even though it might cost his/her life.

The believers in Smyrna were the targets of heavy spiritual pressures. Jesus acknowledged three things about them: He knew about their “afflictions” (*thlipsis*), a word which can also be translated “persecution” and “tribulation;” He knew about their “material poverty;” and He knew about “the slander against them by those who say they are Jews and are not.”

Afflictions, poverty, and slander. These were “strengths” of the fellowship in Smyrna, but it is difficult for us to think of these three conditions as “strengths” of a local church fellowship. Most believers in America would consider afflictions, poverty, and slander as “problems” to be overcome as soon as possible so that life would become more comfortable. However, believers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, as well as believers in many areas of the world who are under persecution today, consider it a privilege to suffer for Jesus.

There is a very good example of this attitude in the book of Acts. On one occasion, the religious leaders in Jerusalem ordered the apostles to be flogged because they preached about Jesus in the temple courts. The apostles “rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” of Jesus (*Acts 5:41*)<sup>1</sup>. Many persecuted believers today have the same attitude.

I receive reports every day about the abuse, loss of possessions, and ridicule endured by the followers of Jesus in many areas of our world. There have been, in fact, more Christians in the past two generations who have lost their lives because of their faith than in all other generations since Pentecost combined. As believers, we live in a world which is becoming increasingly oppressive.

We don't know for certain why the members of the church in Smyrna were so poor in such a prosperous city. Perhaps the refusal of the believers to participate in emperor worship brought on economic sanctions. In many areas of the world, loyalty to Jesus brings on economic pressures and physical abuse. For example, in some locations in India, Christians are denied access to community wells, they cannot buy and sell in the markets, and they are turned away from medical clinics. In recent years, believers in numerous villages in Africa have lost their material possessions and had their homes burned. Christians in Syria and Iraq and Egypt are in extremely precarious situations at the present time.

The glorified Jesus also knew about “the slander of those who say they are Jews.” Both Roman Gentiles and Orthodox Jews were extremely prejudiced against Christians — the Romans because believers refused to pay respect to “Caesar as Lord,” and the Jews because the believers claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, which they did not accept. The Jews viewed the believers, many of whom were converts from Judaism, as heretics of the worst sort, and they used malicious untruths (“slander”) to stir up resentment in the city against the members of the church fellowship.

The Jews claimed descent from Abraham, but Jesus stated that they were “of the synagogue of Satan.” This statement explains that the driving force behind the persecution of believers was Satan. The name “Satan” means “adversary” and “slanderer.” The Jews were the human “tools” and “instruments” used by Satan to slander and afflict believers and to suppress their impact in society.

The believers in Smyrna lived in very antagonistic and desperate conditions, yet it was these conditions which brought them so close to God. Jesus was pleased with their behavior because He knew that they were laying up “treasures in heaven” through of their faithfulness to Him.

When Jesus was teaching His disciples during the Sermon on the Mount, one of His topics concerned “motivation” and “ambition.” He told His listeners, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust (and antagonistic neighbors) destroy”, “but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (*Matthew 6:19-21*).

The believers in Smyrna had no other resource to turn to than God. The more desperate their situation became, the more they demonstrated their faithfulness and perseverance, and Jesus assured them that He knew their circumstances and that in His opinion, they were “rich” toward God.

Jesus alerted them to the increased difficulties they would face. He announced that suffering and imprisonment were in their immediate future, and He encouraged them to be “faithful even to the point of death.” They were not to be “afraid of what they were about to suffer.” Jesus taught His disciples to not be “afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” Rather, He said, “be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (*Matthew 10:28*). Jesus’ last statement to the believers in Smyrna was that they would “not be hurt at all by the second death,” assuming they would be overcomers.

The Apostle John was himself a model of how to live through persecution. Back in chapter 1 he reported that he was the “brother and companion” of his readers “in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are in Jesus,” and he reported that he was in exile “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (*Revelation 1:9*). Believers in Asia Minor would have been encouraged by John.

Verse 10 informs us that the purpose of the imprisonment of believers was that they might be “tested.” The immediate context indicates that the testing will be caused by the devil, to get them to give up their faith, but in the broader context, it was God’s purpose to prove and manifest the genuineness of the believers’ faith through their negative experiences. The faithful endurance of believers in this age, in spite of their negative circumstances, is a main theme in this book. We will be encouraged as we study of this book.

Just as Jesus was faithful unto death, and gained His great spiritual victory through what seemed to be defeat, His followers are to be faithful in their journeys through this age to the glory of God even when it seems that the devil has the upper hand. Jesus taught His disciples to “deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Him” (*Mark 8:34*). The “cross” to be borne by the sincere believer is more than a metaphor for denying self; it means that the true disciple must be willing to go all the way with Jesus, even to death, if necessary, in order to please God and advance God’s purposes.

The reward is “the crown of life.” We must not think of this as the kind of crown which goes on the head of a king. The crown referred to in this verse is what was given to the victor in an athletic contest or to a military hero. It was a garland wreath given in recognition of meritorious service. In the context of verse 10, it would be the reward for those who were faithful unto death.

I want us to think about this subject of suffering and rewards carefully. It is my opinion that there are benefits of living for Jesus in this age, especially when living for Jesus puts the believer in an oppressive situation. It is also my opinion that rewards are not just for life after physical death. The Apostles considered suffering for Jesus to be a privilege, not something to be endured with sorrow. John and Peter and Paul described how suffering for Jesus was painful, but it was for them, a participation with Jesus at a deep spiritual level which gave them unanticipated joys.

In His teaching Jesus shocked His disciples with statements such as “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness” and Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” Jesus wanted His followers to “Rejoice and be glad” in this life in anticipation of their reward in heaven” (*Matthew 5:10-12*) and He also said, “I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or family members (*brothers or sisters or mother or father or children*) or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age ... and in the age to come, eternal life.” When stating this fact, Jesus made clear that the benefits of this age would be accompanied with persecution (*Mark 10:29-30*). In other words, in spite of the afflictions and poverty and slander and imprisonment and other forms of persecution, believers will receive spiritual riches in this age which will greatly exceed their expectations. Faithful believers are assured of spiritual riches now, and eternal life in the age to come.

One of the benefits of a tight relationship with Jesus is that we don't need to fear physical pain and death. We must "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame. ... We must consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that we will not grow weary and lose heart" (*Hebrews 12:2-3*). Jesus made an unlimited commitment to us; we, in turn, are to make such a commitment to him.

<sup>1</sup> *Biblical statements about the attitudes of believers were written by the Apostle Peter. See I Peter 1:6-7; 2:21-24; 3:14-15; 4:1-2, 12-19.*